

Mapping the Dominican-American Experience:

Narratives by

Julía Alvarez, Junot Díaz, Loida Maritza Pérez and Angie Cruz

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Abstract

Dominican mass-migration to the United States only started in the 1960s but Dominican Americans are now a sizable minority and in 2014 they became the largest Latino group in New York City. This thesis examines fictional works by Dominican American writers who migrated to the United States from the early 1960s to the 1990s which explore the predicament of Dominican Americans before and after the consolidation of Dominican- American communities. The novels under scrutiny here were published in English between 1991 and 2012 by Julia Alvarez (b. 1950), Loida Maritza Pérez (b. 1963), Junot Díaz (b. 1969), and Angie Cruz (b. 1972) and present us with characters whose search for a ‘home’ and for ways in which to articulate their individual and collective identity are shaped by continuous negotiations between the traditional values of their country of origin and the potentially transformative opportunities afforded by their new country. I will show how these texts powerfully challenge homogeneity, marginalisation, mainstream ideologies, nationalism, and discrimination while questioning the economic, social, religious, patriarchal, educational, and political structures of both the Dominican Republic and the United States in order to formulate diverse modalities of belonging to what Julia Alvarez has called a new “country that’s not on the map” and establish their own distinct position as Dominican American writers.

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Introduction

In 2014, Dominicans became the largest Latino group in New York City.¹ Dominican-American communities, however, are a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States: as a matter of fact, Dominicans began to migrate to the United States in significant numbers only in the early 1960s and, in particular, after the 1961 assassination of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo who had seriously restricted exit visas for thirty years.² Notably, Dominican migration and the United States foreign politics have always been strictly linked: Trujillo, in fact, was trained militarily by the US Marines during the first United States occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-1924) and the establishment of his autocratic rule in 1930 was supported by the United States.³ In the years between 1930 and 1961, Trujillo tightly controlled the country's resources as well as out-migration which, for about thirty years, was estimated to be only about nine hundred people per year.⁴ The majority of those who left the country during Trujillo's presidency were not economic migrants but members of the educated elites or political dissidents who escaped the Dominican Republic fearing the torture and kidnapping practiced by Trujillo's secret police (SIM).⁵ While many anti-Trujillo political activists disappeared without any proof of their death, the mystery of their fate made it harder for people to go against the government and Trujillo became infamous for his ability to maintain his power against military coups and reaching his opponents even outside the country.⁶ In his last years of rule, Trujillo kept the United States at his side taking advantage of the American conflict with Cuba by insuring the American government that the Dominican Republic was not going to become a communist country. In the early 1960s, however, the Kennedy administration started scheming to assassinate Trujillo, partly because of rumours of an alliance between Trujillo and the Soviet Union.⁷ The Dominican opposition, supported by the United States, succeeded in assassinating Trujillo on the 30th of May 1961.

¹ Claudia Balthazar, "New York City's Dominican Population Becomes the Largest Latino Community for the First Time" *Latin Post*, 14 November 2014 <<http://www.latinpost.com/articles/25876/20141114/new-york-citys-dominican-population-becomes-largest-latino-community-first.htm#ixzz3JCaTfgWt>> (accessed 16 March 2016).

² Christian Krohn-Hansen, "From Quisqueya to New York City," in *City in the Twenty-First Century: Making New York Dominican: Small Business, Politics, and Everyday Life* (Baltimore: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 31.

³ Alex Von Tunzelmann, *Red Heat: Terror, Conspiracy, and Murder in the Cold War Caribbean* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 22.

⁴ Pope Atkins and Larman C. Wilson, *The Dominican Republic and the United States: From Imperialism to Transnationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 91.

⁵ Jorge Duany, *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 55.

⁶ Lauren Hutchinson Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 140, 205.

⁷ Von Tunzelmann, 259

The political chaos which followed the elimination of Trujillo led to a civil war and the second United States occupation of the Dominican Republic (1965-6). As a result of the political turmoil, Dominican out-migration increased significantly, particularly when Joaquín Antonio Balaguer, elected as President of the Dominican Republic in 1966,⁸ abolished the visa restrictions imposed by Trujillo: according to Peggy Levitt, the number of migrants rose from 1,000 per year in the 1950s to almost 10,000 per year in the 1960s.⁹ Many Dominicans migrated to Spain, Mexico or, mostly, to the United States — partly because of the link between the two countries rekindled by the recent occupation — where they began to establish new communities in New York, mainly in Brooklyn and Manhattan.¹⁰ The economic crisis which hit the Dominican Republic in the 1970s also led to large mass migration to the United States: as David Howards reports, in the Dominican Republic of the 1980s, remittances— the cash and goods which Dominicans receive from their migrant family members— became “a greater source of export earning than the sugar industry” and they continue to be a very large source of foreign income in the country.¹¹

A definition of ‘Dominican-American’ literature is tricky to achieve as it operates at the intersection of English and Spanish, of Latin-American literature and Hispanic Literature, of Caribbean literature and American literature, of African-American literature, Dominican literature and diasporic studies, each of which is complicated in its own terms. In addition, the term ‘Dominican-American’ is further complicated by the language chosen by writers of Dominican descent based in the United States. Torres-Saillant explains that the choice of language distances the writing from both literary bodies of work in the Dominican Republic and the United States:

Many in literary circles of the Dominican Republic would frown upon an effort to place the Anglophone writings of Angie Cruz or Nelly Rosario within the country’s national literary history, just as many in the United States would deny the Spanish-

⁸ Balaguer ruled the country for three presidential periods (1960-1962, 1966-1978 and 1986-1996). Between 1957 and 1960 Balaguer was Vice-President of the Republic when Trujillo’s brother Héctor served as President and in 1960 he became a “puppet president” for Trujillo. Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic A National History* (NY: Hispaniola Books, 1995), 371.

⁹ Peggy Levitt, “Dominican Republic,” in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters & Reed Ueda (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 400.

¹⁰ Duany, 55.

¹¹ David Howard, *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (Oxford : Signal Books; Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 108.

language texts of New York-based Dominican poets Juan Rivero or Tomás Rivera Martínez a place of belonging with American literature.¹²

This thesis discusses the fictional works of four Dominican American authors who chart Dominican experiences of migration to the United States from the early 1960s to more recent times and express themselves in English (or, as we will see in Díaz's case, 'Spanglish'). I will focus on Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999), Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), *Soledad* (2001) and *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005) by Angie Cruz with brief references to Alvarez's *¡Yo!* (1997) and Díaz's short story collection *Drown* (1996).¹³ I have chosen novels published in English because I wanted to pay particular attention to the role played by the acquisition of English as it is investigated by these writers who have simultaneous access to two rich linguistic and cultural heritages. Overall, Dominican-American communities maintain a close connection with the language and traditions of the mother country and also the novels under study here reveal, in different ways, the strong (if at time ambivalent) links that Dominican migrants maintain with their country of origin: for example, almost invariably, as the migrants' financial conditions improve and they can afford to return to the Dominican Republic for holidays, visits back home become increasingly important in the protagonists' identity negotiations.

According to the 2000 census, Dominican Americans (especially first-generation Dominican migrants) often lived "segregated" lives, isolated — at least up to a point — from the rest of society: about 37 percent of Dominicans households in the United States were considered Spanish speakers only.¹⁴ In 1993, Jorge Duany concluded that Dominican Americans kept a lot of their traditions and festivals and preserved Spanish as their main language of communication -

¹² Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Dominican-American Literature" in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, ed. Frances Aparicio (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2013), 424.

¹³ For more information about Dominican American writers not included here because their migration preceded the post-1960 mass migration see, for example, Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Before the Diaspora: Early Dominican Literature in the United States," in *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage*, vol. 3, ed. Maria Herrera-Sobek and Virginia (Texas: Arte Público Press, 1998). In this chapter, Torres-Saillant examines the writing of the Henríquez Ureña family who migrated to New York in 1901. Pedro Henríquez wrote poems mostly, but also literary essays and a dramatic piece. His writing is mostly in Spanish except a criticism book entitled, *Literary Currents of Hispanic America*. Most of the other works Torres-Saillant lists are works of poetry by Dominican writers who wrote in Spanish such as José M. Bernard (1873-1954), Fabio Fiallo, who was also a short-story writer (1866-1942) and Manuel Florentino Cestero (1879-1926). Torres-Saillant also includes Andréx Reuena, a fiction writer, mostly known for his novel *Cementerio sin cruces* (1951), published in New York. Reuena was murdered by Trujillo's men for criticising the dictator. Since I have not included narratives which focus on the migration to the United States before-1960 in this thesis, Julia Alvarez's *In the Name of Salomé* (2001) which depicts the life of Salomé Henríquez Ureña does not form part of the cluster of texts under scrutiny here.

¹⁴ Levitt, 404.

especially in their neighbourhoods- using it to name places and streets.¹⁵ This Dominican ‘appropriation’ of American neighbourhoods -in particular in Washington Heights in New York- is part of what has been described as the “Dominicanization of the physical surroundings”: as we will see, while some of the characters in the works under scrutiny here rely on this ‘Dominicanization’ as an important source of support, others (often young women, albeit not exclusively) want to escape from what they consider its linguistic, cultural and financial limitations.¹⁶

The Dominican migrants’ inability to speak English, in fact, led to fewer chances of employment for both men and women and those who managed to get a job had to settle for low incomes: in 2000, for example, “only 61 percent of [Dominican American] males and 48 percent of females classified themselves as employed”¹⁷ and, according to Duany, in 2009, Dominicans had the second lowest income among other diasporas in New York after Puerto Ricans.¹⁸ With the exception of Alvarez’s Garcías, who are part of the Dominican elite and manage to remain relatively affluent in the United States, the protagonists of the other novels clearly mirror and illustrate the predicament and life conditions of poor American-Dominicans: all the characters come from low-income families which struggle to make ends meet. Levitt has observed that the same poverty-stricken communities also became demonised by the media: for example, the fact that some youngsters went into drug dealing to earn a living created a stigma for the whole community despite the fact that the majority was not involved in illegal trafficking.¹⁹ Both Díaz and Cruz, as we will see, try to shed some light in their works on the predicament of disenfranchised youth and on the negative effects of stereotyping and discrimination.

When Dominicans started settling in the United States at the beginning of the 1960s, they had to define their own territory as new-comers in areas where other diasporic communities had already established themselves: in addition to white-Americans, Dominicans also came in contact (often in conflictual contact as it will be demonstrated, for example in Julia Alvarez’s novel) with other ‘minorities’ such as African Americans, white European migrants from different generations (such as Germans – mostly Jewish escaping the Nazis – Irish and Italians), other Latino groups such as Mexicans, other Latino-Caribbean migrants such as Puerto Ricans and Cubans, and also migrants from the neighbouring country of Haiti. Dominicans, however,

¹⁵ Duany, 176.

¹⁶ Silvio Torres-Saillant, “Dominican Americans” in *Multiculturalism in the United States: A Comparative Guide to Acculturation and Ethnicity*, ed. John D. Buenker and Lorman A. Ratner (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 106-7.

¹⁷ Levitt, 403.

¹⁸ Duany, 177.

¹⁹ Levitt, 404.

arrived at the hybrid society of the United States with their own cultural hybridity which existed in the Dominican Republic as a result of colonisation, slavery, subsequent waves of migration, or the presence of religious missionaries of several denominations. The experience of migration, moreover, added an extra layer to Dominican ‘hybridity’: according to the Dominican American theorist and critic Silvio Torres-Saillant,

a characteristic feature of the cultural identity of the [Dominican-American] group is to be found precisely in the continuous negotiation of traditions, practices, and beliefs inherited from the ancestral homeland and the transformative thoughts, values and ways emanating from the experience of living as an ethnic minority in the United States.²⁰

All the texts under investigation here focus on the experience of migration but some also depict a diverse Dominican population: the protagonist of one of Angie Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee*, for example, is a Dominican of Chinese descent and Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* undermines the stereotype of a prevalently Catholic Dominican Republic by focusing on a family of Seven-Adventists and by foregrounding ‘alternative’ folk belief systems which are also explored in the other texts studied here.

The fact that folk belief systems play an important role in all these novels does not imply that they rely on a formulaic redeployment of magic realist conventions. The foregrounding of science-fiction by the narrator of Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for example, seems to continue the tradition of cognitive estrangement inaugurated by Alejo Carpentier’s 1948 exploration of the *real maravilloso*²¹ but he also seems to be perfectly aware of current debates on magic realism when he discusses *zafa*, the counterspell to *fúku*, an ancestral curse which plays a crucial role in the novel: “‘Zafa,’ he claims, ‘used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo.’”²² Macondo is the setting of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel published in 1967 which became a

²⁰ Torres-Saillant, (2005), 110.

²¹ Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), 75-88. For a study of the relationship between Díaz and Carpentier see María del Pilar Blanco, “Reading the Novum World: The Literary Geography of Science Fiction in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” in *Surveying the American Tropics: A Literary Geography from New York to Rio*, ed. Maria Christina Fumagalli, Peter Hulme, Owen Robinson and Lesley Wylie (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 69-74.

²² Silvio Torres-Saillant, “Dominican Americans” in *Multiculturalism in the United States: A Comparative Guide to Acculturation and Ethnicity*, ed. John D. Buenker and Lorman A. Ratner (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 106-7.

²² Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (USA: Penguin Group, 2008). Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses in the text. Junot Díaz, *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996), 7.

founding text of Latin American magical realism; McOndo, on the other hand, is a polemical term coined at the cusp of the century by the Chilean Alberto Fuguet and other writers who felt that, by then, magical realism had become “a sort of curse” which limited the creativity of Latin American writers.²³ According to Fuguet “McOndo is a global, mixed, diverse, urban, 21st-century Latin America, bursting on TV and apparent in music, art, fashion, film and journalism, hectic and unmanageable. Latin America is not a folk tale [...] Magical realism reduces a much too complex situation and just makes it cute.”²⁴ Arguably, the reality described by Díaz, Pérez, Alvarez and Cruz is equally, if not more, complex than the one Fuguet is concerned with if one considers that all the novels are set in migrant communities where the protagonists have to negotiate, simultaneously, different (often contrasting) cultures and languages, and where traditional folk beliefs exist side by side (and often come into collision with) the way of life of mainstream North Americans. The presence of supernatural elements and the foregrounding of Afro-Caribbean folk beliefs in the works under scrutiny here, therefore, testifies to the authors’ commitment to acknowledge all the different facets of life in a migrant community rather than signposting their desire to adopt and adapt to disabling stereotypes or to turn a complex reality into a ‘cute fable’.

Despite the ever growing number of Dominican Americans in the United States and the increasing attention that has been given to Dominican-American literature after Junot Díaz received Pulitzer Prize for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2008, there is still no sustained or dedicated study of fiction which, putting in dialogue a substantial number of texts written in English, maps the continuous negotiations between Dominican values, the Dominican-American experience and the cluster of opportunities (and frustrations) deriving from the migration to the United States that have shaped the Dominican group’s attempts at self-identification in the past fifty-five years. Of the authors whose work is presented here, Julia Alvarez is the first one to have been acknowledged as a Dominican-American fiction writer when she published her first novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in 1991. Since then, Alvarez has continued to publish extensively and is the subject of two monographs.²⁵ Junot Díaz, however, is probably the best-known of the group because of the aforementioned Pulitzer Prize; since 2008 he has continued to receive accolades and awards in the United States and has also taken an active role in denouncing to the media the Dominican Republic’s discrimination against

²³ Alberto Fuguet, “Magical Neoliberalism,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 125 (Jul-Aug 2001): 69.

²⁴ Fuguet, 69.

²⁵ Kelli Lyon Johnson, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map* (USA: the University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

Silvio Sirias, *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion* (USA: Greenwood Press, 2001).

Dominicans of Haitian descent.²⁶ Less attention has been dedicated to Loida Maritza Pérez's only novel *Geographies of Home* (1999) and Angie Cruz's *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee* (2001, 2005) but they are briefly mentioned in Torres-Saillant's 'Dominican American Literature' which forms a chapter of the *Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*²⁷ and in Elizabeth Coonrod Martinez's 'Between the Island and the Tenements: New Directions in Dominican-American Literature,' one of the chapters in *A Companion to US Latino Literatures*.²⁸ Some of the writers under scrutiny here are mentioned in recent publications which analyse Dominican-American literature like Lucía M Suárez's *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (1995), where Dominican-American and Haitian-American fiction are put in dialogue, or Danny Méndez's *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* (2012) which focuses on narratives of migration to the United States and Puerto Rico dating from the nineteenth century and includes the non-fictional works of Pedro Henríquez Ureña and the performance works of Josefina Báez.²⁹ In Suárez's monograph, we find a chapter on Díaz's short story collection *Drown* and brief discussions of Alvarez's and Pérez's works while Méndez also examines Díaz's *Drown* and, in a chapter devoted to race and gender, offers an analysis of Loida Maritza Pérez's novel vis-à-vis Báez's performance texts *Dominicanish* (2000).

My thesis aims to fill the above-mentioned gap in the scholarship by offering a detailed study of some of the ongoing negotiations highlighted by Torres-Saillant as they are depicted in contemporary Dominican-American fiction where indicators of 'identity' such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, language and age are rendered fluid, mutated or inflected by the migratory experience and by the ways in which the characters perceive themselves and the communities around them. As we will see, Alvarez, Díaz, Pérez, and Cruz insist, albeit in different ways, on the isolation and separation of their protagonists who tend to suffer from multiple forms of alienation: feeling stifled by the traditional values of their family and migrant community, they also feel rejected by the wider society and excluded from the many opportunities it would seem to offer; unable to find external professional recognition (some of

²⁶ Joanna Walters, "Author Junot Díaz: called unpatriotic as Dominican Republic strips him of award," *The Guardian*, 25 October 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/25/junot-diaz-author-dominican-republic-haiti-immigration>> (accessed 24 April 2016).

²⁷ Torres-Saillant, (2013).

²⁸ Elizabeth Coonrod Martinez, "Between the Island and the Tenements: New Directions in Dominican-American Literature," in *A Companion to US Latino Literature*, ed. Carlota Caulfield and Darién J. Davis (GB: Boydell and Brewer Ltd, 2007).

²⁹ Lucía M Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (USA: University Press of Florida, 1995).

Danny Méndez, *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

the main characters are writers or artists-in-the-making who feel marginalised), they are also ostracised by those close to them for their choice of career or for the choice of a lifestyle which does not conform to the expectations of their community. While they accept the fact that the United States might provide them with better opportunities than those offered by the Dominican Republic, they are also painfully aware of how the historical relations between the two countries have played a crucial role in the current state of affairs and of the fact that today's power unbalance has very deep roots. As Vanessa Pérez Rosario (2010) has pointed out for Díaz, all the writers I am investigating here “challenge national discourses from [their] country of origin while simultaneously critiquing U.S. hegemonic narratives and imperial power.”³⁰ Moreover, all the novels under scrutiny here create a strong link between migration and creativity: the strategies of survival and the creativity of their characters, in fact, often derive precisely from the fact that their marginalised status and their equidistance from the country of origin and the United States enable them to approach their reality and redefine their status in unexpected ways. Similarly, their *own* experiences of migration, marginalisation and distance have afforded these writers new perspectives, new points of departure from which to enter reality and creatively (re)formulate their understanding of the world around them, their individual position in it and the position of the community they feel they represent. It is noteworthy that all these characters not only feel alienated from mainstream United States and the Dominican Republic but they also share another kind of ‘exclusion’, namely the fact that they differ from their own communities and immediate families in various ways: for example, they belong to ethnic minorities, have unusual interests (like science-fiction), are keen to pursue academic careers, or significantly, want to become writers or artists.

As anticipated, in order to fully understand the kind of mapping carried out individually by Alvarez, Díaz, Pérez and Cruz, it is fundamental to carefully contextualise Dominican-American experiences and to be aware of how they can be deeply affected by the location in which the migrants live and function. This thesis takes the reader through a geographical journey which corresponds to the chronological development of the Dominican-American community and begins and ends in New York City with a significant detour in Northern New Jersey. The experiences in New York City depicted by Alvarez, Pérez and Cruz, however, are extremely different. The starting point is the early 1960s Bronx and Queens when there were virtually no Dominican communities and where Alvarez's characters feel extremely isolated. Similarly isolated are the characters in Perez's novel analysed in the second chapter: here we move to the

³⁰ Vanessa Pérez Rosario, ed., *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration Narratives of Displacement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

Brooklyn of the late 1960s where working class Dominicans like Perez's own family were only beginning to settle. In the third chapter, the thesis focuses on Díaz's Paterson in Northern New Jersey in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s and depicts sizable Dominican communities which, however, feel marginalised due to their geographical location outside New York City. The thesis finally takes us to Washington Heights, New York City in the 1980s and 1990s where Cruz's two novels are set. Washington Heights is well-known for its firmly established and culturally visible Dominican population. While the geography of the texts plays a role in contextualising the Dominican-American experience, it is important to follow the chronology of this geographical journey even when the difference is only by a few years in their date of arrival (for example, the abolition of visa restrictions in the 1960s by the Dominican government resulted in a sudden massive increase in emigration). The narratives investigated here, in fact, represent useful stepping stones in the ongoing search for Dominican-American identity from the 1960 onwards where the protagonists challenge existing national, linguistic, racial, social, gender discourses in both the United States and the Dominican Republic in order to arrive at a more inclusive definition of what being Dominican American might mean.

The first two chapters, as anticipated, deal with two very early examples of migration to the United States. In chapter one, I focus on Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* which deals with the migration of the members of an affluent family of Dominicans (the Garcías) who were forced to leave the Dominican Republic in the very early 1960s, one year before Trujillo's assassination, for political reasons. As it is the case for the novels at the core of the other chapters, the personal experience of the author plays a significant role in the reconstruction of the events: as a matter of fact, if all the texts under scrutiny here are novels, they are often novels with very strong autobiographical elements. For example, Alvarez's family migrated to middle-class Queens, New York in 1960 because Julia's father was involved in a failed political attempt to overthrow the dictator.³¹ The Alvarezs, like the Garcías of the novel, were lucky to escape and the family's move to the United States was facilitated by Alvarez's grandfather who was a powerful man with "ties" in the United States.³² Amongst other things, in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, Alvarez highlights identity-related problems, in particular, the fact that in the United States the Garcías have no contacts with other Dominicans (there were no Dominican-American communities then because of Trujillo's restrictions) and are often mistaken as members of other Latino groups. The novel sheds light on some contradictory

³¹ April Ann Shemak, *Asylum Speakers: Caribbean Refugees and Testimonial Discourse* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 215; Sirias, 3, 12.

³² Sirias, 3.

aspects of the experience of migration: while cultural and linguistic alienation seems to deeply affect the lives of the four girls (their nervous breakdowns or divorces seem to be triggered by it), Alvarez simultaneously depicts migration as a liberating and enlightening experience which enabled her (female) characters to become critically aware of some of the pernicious discourses (in particular in relation to gender) which were still dominant in their country of origin. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and, more specifically, *¡Yo!*, its 1997 'sequel' which I will briefly analyse at the end of the chapter, also argue that the experience of migration helped develop the protagonist's perspective as a writer.

Chapter two focuses on Loida Maritza Pérez's only novel *Geographies of Home* which revolves around the life of a numerous and destitute family whose members move, gradually, to Brooklyn, New York in the turbulent years immediately following Trujillo's death in order to look for a better life: the first to relocate in the United States is the oldest sister, followed by the rest of the family in subsequent years. The autobiographical element is evident here as well: Pérez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1963 and, during the civil war (1965-6), her family migrated to the United States to settle in Brooklyn. Unlike Alvarez, Pérez comes from a Dominican working class background and her female protagonist is the only educated member of her family. As the title points out, the novel chronicles the attempts of various members of the family to find and found a new home in the United States: they are deeply isolated as there is no visible Dominican-American community yet to identify with and they are unable to return to the Dominican Republic even for brief visits because of extreme poverty. As the young female protagonist's search for a safe and nurturing place pushes her to test the limits of her traditionalist and strictly religious family, she realises that 'home' is more an increasingly difficult-to-achieve state of mind than a physical space.

Chapter three, devoted to Díaz's work, also carefully analyses the protagonists' sense of exclusion and marginalisation. Díaz was born in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, in 1968 and moved to Perth Amboy, New Jersey in 1975 when he was only seven years old and when his country of origin was hit by a deep economic crisis.³³ Díaz's father was the first one to relocate in the United States on his own, followed by his wife and children a few years later; the family, however, did not stay together for long and the father moved out not long after their arrival. The novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Díaz's first collection of short stories, *Drown* (1996) focus on the Dominican-American community of Northern New

³³ Robert Strauss, "From Street to Scholar, a Writer Shows Off His Dexterity," *The New York Times*, 25 November, 2007. <www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/25authornj.html?ref=junotdiaz> (accessed 16 March 2016).

Susan Trosky, ed., *Contemporary Authors*, v.161. (USA: Gale Research Company, 1981), 107.

Jersey and have been described as “disguised autobiography.”³⁴ *Drown* revolves around a boy called Yunior who moves to the United States as a child and lives in his mother-headed family when his father marries another woman. Yunior is also the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *This is How you Lose Her*, another collection of short stories published in 2012 and, like Díaz himself, he is also a writer.³⁵ Unlike Alvarez’s and Pérez’s protagonists, Díaz’s characters are part of the Dominican-American wider community of Northern New Jersey and the chapter investigates the sense of exclusion felt by members of this specific community, both within the community itself and in relation to the United States as a whole. Díaz’s work also chimes with Cruz’s when it testifies to the emerging pattern of migrants’ regular returns to the country of origin for holidays and to the increasing importance of remittances in form of goods or cash. These exchanges add to the complexity of place, making it harder for Dominican-American characters to identify exclusively with one home or another.

With chapter four and five, we move from the marginalised Dominican-American communities of Northern New Jersey examined by Díaz to Angie Cruz’s depiction of Washington Heights in New York. Cruz, as her predecessors, also incorporates some biographical elements in her novels: she was born in 1972 in Washington Heights to Dominican parents and, like the female protagonist of her novel *Soledad*, she grew up around the late 1980s and early 1990s within a well-established Dominican-American community. The twenty-one-year old protagonist of *Soledad* is also an aspiring artist, a fact which adds to her sense of exclusion from her family which does not support her choice of career, and from her community which treats her as an outsider for not fulfilling her traditional role as a Dominican female. Exclusion in *Soledad* comes from the family immediate migrant community but also from the art world. Arts institutions, in fact, are depicted as ivory towers which are not interested in promoting the expression of diversity. At the end, the young artist ends up realising that she cannot entirely reject or leave behind her places of origin (Washington Heights or, ultimately, the Dominican Republic) and, like the protagonists of all the other novels, she, therefore, begins her own version of the painful process of continuous negotiations described by Torres-Saillant.

The last chapter gives us a rare glimpse into the life of an elderly Dominican of Chinese descent who joins his son’s family in Washington Heights from the Dominican countryside after the death of his wife. *Let It Rain Coffee*, also by Angie Cruz, starts when the protagonist migrates to the United States in 1991 where he witnesses the precarious living conditions of

³⁴ Strauss.

³⁵ Maya Jaggi, “Junot Diaz: a Truly all-American Writer,” *The Independent*, 29 February 2008 <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/junot-diaz-a-truly-all-american-writer-789382.html> (accessed 16 March 2016).

Dominican Americans and the exploitation they experience and remembers how the history of his country has always been shaped by its relations to the United States from Trujillo's rise to power to the 1965 civil war and the creation of an American Dream fostered by the media — the TV series *Dallas*, in fact, plays a crucial part in the story. The novel ends with the old man's return to the Dominican Republic in 1999 where he realises, with bitterness, how the traditional Dominican way of life continues to be shaped by American influence.

Overall, therefore, when read together, these novels sketch a very rich and diversified map of the Dominican-American experiences which have shaped and influenced the creation of a distinctive Dominican-American literature in English which operates at the intersection of English and Spanish, of Latin-American literature and Hispanic Literature, of Caribbean literature and American literature, of African-American literature, Dominican literature and diasporic studies.

Chapter One

Crossing Boundaries:

Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *¡Yo!* (1997)

Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* investigates the predicament of a family who, like the author's own, migrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States in the early 1960s.³⁶ *¡Yo!* inaugurates the trend to focus on individuals whose choice of career results in a double alienation: in this case, Yo is a writer whose work causes friction within her family and who is also marginalised by the literary establishment because of her origin and chosen topics.

Alvarez, in fact, was born in 1950 in New York City to Dominican parents but shortly after her birth, her family moved back to Santo Domingo where, for about ten years, they would enjoy a relatively easy life underpinned by the wealth of their elite relations. Alvarez's family moved to Queens, in East Manhattan, in early 1960, after her father had become involved in a failed complot to eliminate Trujillo masterminded by the CIA. Like the Alvarezes, the Garcías escape from the Dominican Republic to the United States in 1960 after the father conspires with the CIA to overthrow Trujillo and manage to leave the country in spite of the imposed travel restrictions and the threats from the Dominican secret police because of the family's high social status and their connections with US embassy officials based in the Dominican Republic. The fictional family depicted in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is comprised of the father Carlos García, the mother Laura de la Torre, and four daughters: Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía. The book starts at the chronological end of the storyline, working its way backwards through time, and is divided into three main parts, consisting of five chapters each: the first part, 1989-1972, narrates the lives of the daughters as they come of age in the United States; the second part, 1970-1960, describes the lives of the newly-migrated Garcías settling in New York; the third part, 1960-1956, focuses on the Garcías' lives, and the threats and intimidation they faced before their emigration. The narrative voice shuffles between third- and first-person narrative perspectives throughout. While four out of five chapters in the first part are relayed by an omniscient narrator, four and a half chapters of the last part are narrated in the first-person voice. As such, the author produces the effect of an increasing intimacy and personalisation of

³⁶ Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (USA and Canada: Bloomsbury, 1991). Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses in the text.

Julia Alvarez, *¡YO!* (New York: Plume, 1997). Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses in the text.

the story as it progresses. The reader is therefore offered what appears to be a less ‘subjective’ view of the family in later years, and a closer, more emotionally intense, perspective on the period of the girls’ childhood and adolescence: by the time the reader reaches the last part, the four girls can vividly recount their memories of being children in the Dominican Republic, allowing us to share their sense of loss for how they had to leave behind in the family’s quest for safety in the United States.

Life in the Dominican Republic, however, is not always idealised: the novel contains harsh criticism of Dominican class division and reveals how influential Dominican elites sustain and maintain economic and political power through the perpetuation of white supremacy. This can be seen in the game Carlos plays with the young Yolanda. He holds the child upside down until she acknowledges their family’s European ancestry:

“Do you have the blood of the Conquistadores?” Yoyo always says no, until she can’t stand it anymore [...] and she says yes. Then he puts her right side up and laughs a great big Conquistador laugh that comes all the way from the green, motherland hills of Spain (197).

Of course this game is a humorous tease, but the final line of the passage shows how the myth of pure white European ancestry is ultimately enforced in the child’s mind through play and how skin colour is strictly linked to power and privilege in a society which is characterised by what Howard calls a “mulato/a majority”.³⁷ In the García’s world, however, it is clear that the old kind of white European *conquistadores* had been substituted by a new form of white ‘colonisers’ who were spreading their influence in different ways. Alvarez, in fact, emphasises the role the United States played in sustaining the rigid class divisions of the Dominican Republic through, for example, the provision of education to the Dominican elite at institutions within the United States. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* records the Dominican elite’s tendency to study abroad in American universities and prep schools: for example, the CIA agent who helps the family escape the Dominican Republic, knows the Garcías because he met one of the uncles at university in the United States. It is through uncle Mundo that the agent –Victor– is able to approach and recruit various other members of the Dominican elite to serve the United States’ agenda: “Old buddy [Mundo] introduced [Victor] around till he knew every firebrand among the upper-class fellas the State Department wanted him to groom for revolution” (205). Moreover,

³⁷ Howard, 58.

even before the Garcías' emigration, echoing the author's own upbringing in the Dominican Republic, we know that the mother Laura is trying to raise her girls in the Dominican Republic following what she calls the "American style" (202). Similarly, Alvarez describes her own childhood education as: "a colonialist one: not imposed from the outside but from within my own family. I was to learn the culture, tongue, manners of the powerful country to our north."³⁸ Alvarez also explains that her 'American' education resulted in her feeling a sense of separation from her childhood surroundings and community: "What, indeed, did this world [of the Dominican Republic] have to do with the capital of Alabama and Dick and Jane and a big red bouncing ball? And what on earth was apple pie? Was it anything at all like a pastel de tamarindo?"³⁹ The early sense of alienation from the native country produced by this 'colonialist' education at home is not directly acknowledged in the story but it is evident that some of the protagonists, especially Yolanda, have clear difficulties when they try to (re)claim the Dominican Republic as their home since their experience and memories of the Dominican Republic seem to be limited to what took place within the (Americanised) sheltered family compound.

In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez harshly criticises United States imperialism in different ways. We are told that the CIA agent Victor, for example, spends his time in brothels where he can find "the little girls he likes, hot little numbers, dark and sweet like the little cups of *cafecito* so full of goddam caffeine and Island sugar you're shaking half the day" (205-6). It is notable that here his exoticising of Dominican girls makes reference to the coffee and the sugar produced on the island, thus echoing the corporate interests of the colonial and imperial powers in the country.⁴⁰ As sexual conquest is aligned with economic conquest, Victor's sexual adventures are revealed to be of an extremely more exploitative and disturbing nature: when he visits Mundo's house, Victor sees Carla, Yolanda, and their female cousins having dinner, and he realises that "the sweet little numbers", namely, his favoured child prostitutes, "are not much older than some of the little sirens sitting around the table" (206). The fact that Victor, as an avatar of the United States imperial interests, is portrayed as a paedophile, emphasises the abusive position of dominance the States has over the Dominican Republic which also significantly informs the García family's migrant experiences in the United States.

³⁸ Julia Alvarez. *Something to Declare*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 135.

³⁹ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 135.

⁴⁰ I will go back to this in chapter five but it is notable that most of the sugar produced in the Dominican Republic has traditionally gone to the United States and the Dominican Republic is still among the top suppliers to US markets.

Once they arrive in the United States, in fact, the Garcías lose their privileged social status and Alvarez uses indicators such as the area in which they live, the type of accommodation they can afford, or the kind of schools the daughters attend, in order to monitor the movement of the family within or between social strata as their lives unfold. For the first few months, Carlos cannot practice medicine until he passes an exam to validate his Dominican degree (172) and the Garcías live in a small flat in the Bronx, a particularly run-down area where the Garcías are forced to experience a far less privileged lifestyle than the one to which they were accustomed to. In the United States, in fact, the Garcías learn to live for the first time as a nuclear family and are no longer able to depend on the support of their extended family or to enjoy the assistance of the numerous maids and other staff they had to leave behind in their country of origin. Dominican relatives, however, continue to provide financial assistance for the Garcías during their first year in the United States, helping them to overcome their hardships until Carlos is able to start a new practice in the city.

Beyond their reduced living conditions, however, it is in terms of ethnicity and skin colour that the family are forced to re-evaluate their social status. When they lived in the Dominican Republic, their elite social position was associated with lighter skin, and they saw themselves as 'white'. However, when they arrive in the United States, Carla, who has the darkest skin colour among her sisters, suddenly finds herself vulnerable to racism and ethnic discrimination and realises that she is not 'white' in the eyes of the new society she finds herself part of. At school, she is discriminated against by white-American boys who throw stones at her, call her a monkey, and shout: "Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!" (153). The language also plays a crucial part in Carla's sense of alienation in the United States when she is molested in the street by a man who approaches her and then exposes himself. When Laura informs the police of the incident, they question Carla who feels deeply humiliated and she realises that she does not have the vocabulary to describe what happened: as a result, the case is dropped and no charges are filed.

After their first year in the Bronx, Carlos practising medicine again allows the family to move to Queens and the teenage girls to attend a prestigious school where Laura expects them to meet the "'right kind' of Americans" (108). However, the García girls' social mobility only heightens their sense of separation from their surroundings as the girls are excluded from this young American elite because of their foreign origins. "We met the right kind of Americans all right," Yolanda says, "but they didn't exactly mix with us" (108). Despite regaining, at least to some extent, their former social status in the context of the United States, the García girls

continue to be marginalised because of their ethnicity. It is in these broad terms that William Luis points out that migration to the United States effectively equates the class of the elitist Garcías with that of “common Hispanic immigrants.”⁴¹ In the 1960s, in fact, Dominicans were not yet identified as a specific group of migrants but amalgamated with other diasporic communities, such as Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, which mostly consisted of economic migrants, many of whom were uneducated workers employed in low paid jobs.⁴² “Our teachers and classmates at the local Catholic schools,” Alvarez writes of her own childhood in New York, “referred to us as ‘Puerto Ricans’ or ‘Spanish.’ No one knew where the Dominican Republic was on the map.”⁴³ Reflecting the predicament of the Garcías, Alvarez comments on how her own family was perceived in the United States on the basis of ethnic association rather than skills or social background: “it became clear that by being Latinos we had entered the American servant class.”⁴⁴

The absorption of the Garcías into a supposed homogenous community of Latinos led them to be subjected to the criticisms and discrimination directed towards those other migrant ethnicities, regardless of their own specific cultural and social background. The community of Latinos, however, does not appear to be particularly welcoming to the new comers either. Alvarez communicates this by examining the tensions that exist within the building that houses the Garcías in the Bronx. Alfredo, the Puerto Rican building supervisor, looks down on the family and attempts to align himself with the Garcías’ racist white-American neighbour, whom they call La Bruja [the witch]. She always waits for a chance to spout abuse such as “Spics! Go back to where you came from!” or to give generically xenophobic reasons as to why the Garcías should be evicted: “their food smelled. They spoke loudly and not in English.”⁴⁵ On many occasions, Alfredo, on the request of La Bruja, asks Laura to “keep the girls more in line” (170). Frustrated by the pressures upon their liberty, Laura eventually snaps back, stating in desperation that “we have to walk around. We have to breathe” (170). Alfredo responds condescendingly, suggesting that Laura’s frustrations relate to an apparent inability to understand American customs rather than to her being harassed by a racist neighbour: “it is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal” (170). Alfredo also tries to distance himself from the Garcías by speaking only English, and refusing to communicate in

⁴¹ William Luis, “A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*,” *Callaloo* v. 23, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 841.

⁴² The number of Dominican migrants who entered the United States between the years 1950 and 1959 was 9,915 compared to 460,826 Puerto Ricans and 71,962 Cubans for the same period of time. See Duany, 40-56.

⁴³ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 38.

⁴⁴ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 155.

⁴⁵ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 170-1.

his native Spanish. His attitude is particularly annoying to Sandra who feels that Alfredo is not only showing off his knowledge of the country's language and traditions, having lived there for longer, but also implying that, as a Puerto Rican, he truly belongs in the United States while the Garcías do not. The mother Laura so deeply interiorises the need to assert one's belonging to the United States from the linguistic perspective that she urges her daughters to speak exclusively in English and even snaps back in her broken English when Carlos asks her to speak Spanish with the little girls: "when in Rome, do unto the Romans" (135).

The vulnerability and subalterneity experienced by the Garcías upon their arrival in the United States and the correlative sense of alienation are painfully registered by a very young Sandra when her family is invited to dinner at a Spanish restaurant by the Fannings, a white-American couple who had been acquaintances of Laura's family, the de la Torre, in the Dominican Republic. At this point, the Fannings have helped Carlos' obtain his family's US visas, and have promised to help him secure his license to practice medicine in the United States. Sandra here witnesses for the first time the way in which her father interacts with American women like Mrs. Fanning: "he was not himself," she says, "he rounded his shoulders and was stiffly well-mannered, like a servant" (180). When she sees Mrs. Fanning, clearly drunk, kiss her father, Carlos begs Sandra not to mention to her mother what she has just seen and the little girl realises how powerless her father has become now that their lives depend on the kindness of other (American) people. On the same night, Sandra realises that, thanks to her looks, she had an advantage in the American society because she "could pass as American, with soft blue eyes and fair skin" (181) and concludes, with a clear sense of relief, that "being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from [...] Pretty belonged in this country" (182). Yet, when she later sees Spanish dancers performing in the restaurant, Sandra reconsiders her wish to be an American: "this wild and beautiful dance came from people like her, Spanish people" (185). When the drunk Mrs. Fanning joins the dancers, Sandra gets upset once again, feeling that the beauty of the dance is ruined by this interference and, as a form of revenge, Sandra ignores her mother's warning not to be demanding during dinner and asks Mrs. Fanning to buy her a doll in a Spanish dancing costume. When Sandra is made to thank Mrs. Fanning, she indirectly declares her allegiances by saying "*Gracias*," (191) while her sisters, who are given dolls too, thank Mrs. Fanning in English. Sandra's ambivalent attitude to Mrs. Fanning and what she represents illustrates the way in which she will continue to feel stretched between different identities: considered the prettiest in the family because of her fair skin which makes her look American, she also feels alienated from the other García sisters because of this and is said to have "wanted

to be darker complected like her sisters” (52). It is not surprising that Sandra’s perceived separation from her Spanish heritage and her American environment, coupled with the simultaneous feeling that she is able ‘to pass’ for ‘authentic’ in both categories, ultimately result in a serious mental break down.

Alvarez also underlines that when the Garcías migrate from the Dominican Republic to the States, they also move from what is considered as an oppressive patriarchal community to what, in gender terms, is at least perceived to be a more liberal society. In her non-fiction, Alvarez mentions, for example, how one of her aunts was not seen as fulfilling the family’s expectations because: “Tití didn’t seem to want to marry. She refused to work at catching a husband, which should have been her primary focus as a young, nice-looking, upper-class woman” and concludes that women of elite families and working-class women shared the limitations imposed by gender allocations in Dominican society: “the maids and the tías—I began to see—were circumscribed either by poverty or social restrictions, and both were circumscribed by their gender.”⁴⁶ In the García’s world too, women in Laura’s family are limited in their educational choices; Laura herself, while being allowed to finish boarding school in the United States, was prevented from attending university. For most of the elite Dominican families, Alvarez suggests, women were born to be mothers and wives and only allowed to attain a level of education that would not challenge this ideology. For example, the de la Torre family encourages the little girls to learn artistic skills such as drawing and knitting, rather than practical skills or knowledge relevant to white collar employment. When Sandra shows a talent in drawing as a child, all her female cousins are sent to take painting classes with her and, as an adult, Sandra tells us that “*the great female democracy of our blue blood dictated that all the de la Torre girls be given equal decorative skills*” (243; *italics in the text*). Possessing artistic skills, in fact, was clearly seen as an advantage for the future homemakers, and especially fitting for reputable high-class women.

The Garcías’ move to the United States, however, undermines the patriarchal authority that had ruled the family prior to migration. While Carlos’ strongly-accented English renders him vulnerable in the United States, Sandra notices that “Mami was the leader now [...] *She* had gone to school in the States. *She* spoke English without a heavy accent” (176). As Fatima Mujcinovic has noted, in this respect, the novel depicts migration as a “liberating experience”⁴⁷ for women: in the United States Laura feels empowered and expresses this newly-found confidence in her attempt to be an inventor of household tools: “She would prove to these Americans what a smart

⁴⁶Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 150, 155.

⁴⁷ Fatima Mujcinovic, “Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature: Confronting Exilic Absence and Trauma,” *Melus* v.28, No.4 (Winter 2003): 182.

woman could do with a pencil and a pad” (139). A big part of Laura’s aspiration, however, is her need for external recognition, which she had taken for granted in the Dominican Republic, and no longer enjoys in New York: “‘García de la Torre’ Laura would enunciate carefully, giving her maiden as well as married name when they first arrived. But the blank smiles had never heard of her name” (139). At the same time, however, not being recognised by her family name frees Laura from some of the social restrictions that came with that name and she tries to recreate herself anew by taking “adult courses in real estate and international economics and business management, dreaming of a bigger-than-family-size life for herself” (116). Laura enjoys her liberties as a woman in the States and ultimately finds that it is a fair trade for her losing her name and status: “better an independent nobody than a high-class houseslave” (143-4).

Alvarez is also careful to point out how the Dominican patriarchal system ironically mirrors in many ways the principal features of the dictatorship in silencing and suppressing weaker individuals. We are told that when little Yolanda once told their neighbour in Santo Domingo, a colonel in Trujillo’s army, that her father had a gun, unknowingly putting all their lives at risk, Carlos hit his daughter with a belt in the bathroom, turning on the shower so nobody could hear her screaming. Clearly, Yolanda was silenced for good reasons, given the political situation in the Dominican Republic, but male authoritarianism is evident here. This incident shows that Laura acquiesces in the silencing of Yolanda despite disagreeing with the brutality of the method: “[Laura] knew she shouldn’t have beaten Yoyo that time the girl gave them such a scare. But you lose your head in this crazy hellhole, you do, and different rules apply” (202). Significantly, while Laura’s reasoning here justifies her participation in a violent male aggression, we see how, after migration, she behaves rather differently, something which is attributable to a change of context (we are no longer in Trujillo’s Dominican Republic) but also to a different understanding of her role as a wife and mother which is no longer framed as a subservient one. When Yolanda is asked to write a speech for a school celebration, she prepares one which, using Walt Whitman as a springboard, foregrounds self-reliance and empowers independent students rather than simply and dutifully praising the teachers. Carlos, reminded of the dangers he faced when he rebelled against authority in the Dominican Republic, overreacts, destroys his daughter’s ‘subversive’ speech and orders Yolanda to write another one in which she flatters the school teachers. This time, Laura steps in and stands against her husband in support of her daughter. Carlos, outnumbered, considers his daughter and wife’s stance as a specifically engendered rebellion against his authority : “soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women”(145-6), he fears, while, significantly, Yolanda

compares her intransigent father to the hated dictator by calling him “Chapita” – a nickname for Trujillo (147). This insult further enrages Carlos who tries to chase his daughter to give her a beating while Laura intervenes in her defence and prevents this from happening. With Laura’s help, Yolanda then rewrites a ‘proper’ speech to deliver on the following day at school and which made the nuns feel “flattered” (148). Carlos reconciles with his daughter by buying her an electric typewriter, which could be seen as a reward for her being obedient but also as Carlos’ belated admission of guilt and his reluctant acceptance of his daughter’s talent. Importantly, the arrival of the typewriter is singled out in the book as the beginning of Yolanda’s writing career.

If it is true that Laura encourages her daughters’ freedom of thought in the context of a renegotiation of gender roles within the García family, she nevertheless continues to expect the girls to be perfect housewives for their future Dominican husbands. Overall Laura appears in denial of her daughters’ sexuality, creating her own stories about their love lives. For instance, when Yolanda recites a poem about sexual acts at one of her poetry readings, her mother, who is sitting next to Yolanda’s lover, tells him that the poem is just the creation of her daughter’s vivid imagination. She also denies the truth behind Sofía’s escape from the family to marry Otto, her German boyfriend, reinventing it as a story of love at first sight and recasting Sofía’s and Otto’s marriage as a decision blessed by the family. The problematic relationship between Sofía and her father starts when Carlos reads letters written by Otto hidden in his daughter’s drawer: worried that she has had sexual intercourse before marriage, Carlos becomes furious and interrogates her: “Are you dragging my good name through the dirt [...] Are you a whore?” (30). Alvarez here probes gender dynamics by examining the concept of honour: since Carlos, like Laura, refuses to acknowledge his daughters’ sexuality and Sofía’s response to her father’s interference in her personal life is to leave the family home for Otto’s, he is left with little choice but to disown his daughter if he wants to reassert his status as a patriarch and uphold the family’s honour. We are informed that following her elopement with Otto, Carlos refuses to speak to Sofía for six years, even when he visits her following the delivery of her first born, a baby girl. It is only when the twenty-six-year old Sofía delivers a baby boy who is named after him, that Carlos tries to reconcile with her (26). In other words, if women appear to be oppressed by the rigid Dominican patriarchal system, men also seem to be bound by it and are expected to act in accordance with social norms and expectations, a theme which will be further explored in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, discussed in chapter three of this thesis.

One could argue that Carlos and Laura’s enforcement of strict traditional Dominican rules, intended to keep their girls eligible for marriage, causes a separation between the daughters’

burgeoning sense of womanhood and their sense of belonging to the Dominican Republic. Afraid to “lose their girls to America,” (109) Carlos and Laura decide that their daughters, turning into teenagers, should spend their summers in the Dominican Republic, not to lose contact with the traditions and customs of their country of origin. Used to their lives in the United States, the girls start to see the Dominican Republic as a prison, especially as their parents often threaten to send them there whenever they waver from the parental expectations: “whenever one of us got out of line, Mami and Papi would march out the old ‘Maybe what you need *right now* is sometime back home to help set you straight.’ We’d shape up pretty quick, or pretend to” (109).

In the summer of 1970, Laura carries out her threat against the sixteen- year-old Sofía after finding that she has hidden a bag of cannabis in the house. Sofía is ‘condemned’ to spend a year in the Dominican Republic and the ‘transformation’ she undergoes there reveals how different gender roles are closely related to each country’s traditions and customs. When the sisters visit Sofía at the end of the year, they are surprised to find that she has conformed to the expectations of the Dominican patriarchal system: she dresses up like her Dominican female cousins and dates one of their illegitimate cousins, Manuel Gustavo, who is described as a little dictator who dominates Sofía’s looks and actions. When the three sisters argue with Manuel over female rights, he blithely replies: “Yes, women have rights [...] But men wear pants,” showing his simplistic and conventional way of approaching gender roles (122). Mundín, another male cousin who has been living in New York for a few years like the García girls, also reassumes his patriarchal attitude when he returns to the Dominican Republic: “when he’s in the States, where he went to prep school and is now in college”, the García girls comment, Mundín is “one of us, our buddy. But back on the Island, he struts and turns macho; needling us with the unfair advantage being male here gives him” (127). They further describe Mundín’s double standards: “for all his liberal education in the States, and all his sleeping around there and here, and all his eager laughter when his Americanized cousins recount their misadventures, his own sister has to be pure” (125). Back on the island, the García girls are criticised for their independent attitudes also by their female cousins and aunts who “consider it very unfeminine for a woman to go around demonstrating for her rights”(121) when, inspired by women’s rights movements in the United States, the girls encourage them to put up an emancipatory fight. Their female relatives, however, only think in materialistic terms: in response to the García girls’ protestations, an aunt retorts: “look at me, I’m a queen [...] My husband has to go to work every day. I can sleep until noon, if I want. I’m going to protest for my *rights*?” (121). The sisters thus come to believe that the only way to liberate their youngest sister from the Dominican patriarchal system is to take

her back to the United States: to do so, they play on the fears of the older generation that Sofía might lose her virginity to Manuel by making it obvious to the family that Manuel and Sofía are secretly spending a lot of time together *alone* and *unsupervised*. As a result, Sofía's mother decides to take her back with the rest of the family at the end of the vacation and never sends the girls back to the Dominican Republic to spend their summers alone with their relatives. While the García girls consider their plan a success, they feel that this victory has not been achieved without consequences, recognising the weakening of their connection with their extended Dominican family.

Yet while the "Americanized" García girls promote women's liberation in the Dominican Republic, in the United States they find themselves ostracised from the progressive counter-culture of the 1960s due to their lingering connections to Dominican ideology and the influence of traditional religious beliefs. Raised to be devout Catholics at a time when traditional forms of beliefs were being routinely questioned, Yolanda realises rather quickly that what the United States had in store for her was "a cold, lonely life"; "I would never find," she despairs, "someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles" (99). This loneliness manifests itself particularly during Yolanda's time at university where, being the only 'non-white' student in the class, the sole person she is able to identify with is Rudy or Rudolf Brodermann Elmenhurst, a third generation migrant of German origins. Attempting to co-author a poem full of sexual innuendos with him, Yolanda feels as if she is not only an outsider to poetry but also to the English language and to the permissive American culture as a whole. For Yolanda, sexuality and language are connected, and both exacerbate her sense of 'outsiderness': "I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex" (94-5). After the two students date for a while, Rudy becomes frustrated with Yolanda's abstinence from sex. Yolanda, for her part, reflects on the sexual awakening that was occurring in the United States at the time and which seems to merely create pressures of its own and a deep sense of inadequacy: "by the time I went to college, it was the late sixties, and everyone was sleeping around as a matter of principle" (87). As it turns out, sadly, Rudy's expectations also arise from his belief in the stereotype of Hispanic women as exotic and "hot-blooded" and it is notable that Rudy's parents also think of her as a "geography lesson" that would inform their son about other cultures rather than as a real person (99).

If in the United States the Dominican-born Yolanda cannot fully conform to the transgressive campus life, in the Dominican Republic she seems equally unable to act according to the country's class, gender and linguistic parameters due to her status as a Dominican American. Yolanda's visit to the Dominican Republic in 1989 opens the book and begins with her secretly considering to permanently relocate there. The omniscient narrator's description of Yolanda's attitude, appearance and language, however, vividly accentuates her status as an outsider. She is aware that her outfit will be criticised by her aunts and cousins for being 'not feminine' and 'not Dominican' enough: "like a missionary, her cousins will say, like one of those Peace Corps girls who have let themselves go so as to do dubious good in the world" (3-4). Yolanda is also criticised for not understanding the customs and habits of her country of origin. The cousins see that Yolanda's attitude is simplistic and unrealistic when she wants to take the bus alone to reach the guava fields – her cousin Lucinda says "Yolanda, *mi amor*, you *have* been gone long" (9). When Yolanda considers taking a car instead, she is warned by the aunts that "this is not the States [...] A woman doesn't travel alone in this country" (9). Yolanda, however, decides to ignore their warning and takes a road trip on her own, driving one of her cousins' cars. As she passes through the countryside around Santo Domingo, Yolanda assumes that all the extravagant compounds she sees belong to relatives she does not know, an assumption based on her view that the elite has tightened their grip on power and land through a network of intermarriages: "the dozen rich families have intermarried so many times that family trees are tangles of roots" (14). After passing the compounds, she reaches some of the poorer areas, where she is perceived as a rich tourist and not as a Dominican. When Yolanda enters a "cantina" in a small village called Altamira, the old woman who stands behind the counter apologises for her shy grandchild José who hides upon seeing Yolanda: "he's not used to being among people," the grandmother says (14-15). Yolanda interprets the grandmother's "people" as "people with money who drive through Altamira to the beach resorts on the north coast" (15). Yolanda then persuades the little boy, called José, to guide her to the guava fields but on the way back home, Yolanda's car breaks down and she offers José a dollar to bring help from the closest compound, which belongs to the Mirandas, some of the relatives the aunts recommended she rely on in case of emergency. While she is waiting for José, two male workers approach Yolanda. Having her aunts' warnings in her mind "you will get lost, you will get kidnapped, you will get raped, you will get killed," Yolanda fears for her life and is struck motionless with fear (17). When the two men start asking in Spanish if she is ok, she stays speechless until one of them concludes that she might be a lost American tourist: "*¿Americana?*" he asks (20). Yolanda's fears suddenly subside

when she realises that they think she is American and “as if the admission itself loosens her tongue, she begins to speak, English” (20). The critic Kelly Oliver points out that Yolanda panics because she suddenly realises that in a male-dominated society, she is perceived as inferior and powerless; however, Oliver adds, the fact that she is perceived as American tips the scales back in Yolanda’s favour, and she feels secure enough to talk.⁴⁸ Clearly, Yolanda here feels more confident to express herself in English partly because her fears are voiced in her mind in the Spanish of her aunties. Since the two men do not understand English, it is “only when she mentions the name Miranda do their eyes light up with respect. She is saved” (21). Ironically, it is obvious that belonging to a well-known patriarchal family helps the rebellious and independent Yolanda to feel more secure in her native country.

Overall, therefore, in the first two parts of the book, the García girls are portrayed as outsiders in their respective American and Dominican communities, and this leads to profound feelings of estrangement and exclusion and to disorienting withdrawals to previously contested ‘default’ positions. The third and last part of the book describes instead the lives of the Garcías before their migration to the United States and is narrated by the girls from the point of view of their adult selves. This section uses the first person narrative voice, which has the effect of creating a more personal connection between the reader and the experiences described by the girls. Alvarez here suggests that migration has sharpened their perspective not only on gender issues but also on the classism, racism and xenophobia which affect their country of origin. Due to the reverse structure of the narrative, readers undergo a trajectory similar to the protagonists’ as they are exposed to the effects of prejudice in the Dominican Republic after they read about the way in which they affect the Garcías in the United States. Alvarez, in fact, readily explores the stratification of the working classes in the Dominican Republic and shows how workers of Haitian descent, for example, are the least privileged class. The first encounter with Haitian labour in the novel comes in a chapter which is initially narrated by a third person narrator; then the narration shifts to Sofía’s voice, and then, significantly, to Chucha’s the old Haitian maid of the Garcías. In fact, all the Dominican maids in the García household clearly consider themselves to be better than Haitians in general and better than Chucha in particular: “none of the maids liked Chucha because they all thought she was kind of below them, being black and Haitian and all” (219).

Anti-Haitian prejudice in the Dominican Republic is the outcome of an ideology which was further enforced by Trujillo but has its roots in the Haitian occupation of the current

⁴⁸ Kelly Oliver, “Shifting Power Relations in Julia Alvarez’s Fiction,” in *Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 79.

Dominican Republic between 1822 and 1844. Anti-Haitian propaganda depicts Haitians as uncultured and untamed descendants of Africans in contrast to the Dominicans who are seen as superior and civilised descendants of Europeans. Discrimination against Haitians is embedded in the Dominican national discourse which, as Pedro San Miguel has pointed out, is based on three factors: skin-colour (Haitians are black; Dominicans are mulatto or white), language (Haitians speak Creole; Dominicans speak Spanish) and religion (Haitians practice vodou; Dominicans are Roman Catholic).⁴⁹ In *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Sofía thus describes Chucha's shade of skin-colour by distinguishing it from that of a Dominican: "Chucha was super wrinkled and Haitian blue-black, not Dominican *café-con-leche* black" (219). Chucha's accent also differentiates her from the rest of the Dominican maids as she "couldn't say certain words like the word for parsley or anyone's name that had a *j* in it" (218). The reference to parsley (*perejil*) evokes the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans organised by Trujillo in the Dominican borderlands. Since it was not always possible to distinguish between Haitians and Dominicans simply going by skin colour (a fact that questions that skin colour on the island can be neatly established in relation to nationality and ethnicity), those in charge of the killings devised a simple test: Trujillo's soldiers asked those whose origin seemed debatable to repeat the word '*perejil*' and since those of Haitian descent could not always pronounce the 'trilled r' in the correct way, they were condemned to death.⁵⁰ We are also told that Chucha had in fact found refuge from the massacre with the Laura de la Torre's family, and worked there as a maid ever since. Chucha's belief in vodou also identifies her as an outsider (and a threat) among the other maids:

Chucha always had a voodoo job going, some spell she was casting or spirit she was courting or enemy she was punishing [...] I can see why they were afraid. The maids said she got mounted by spirits. They said she cast spells on them (219).

As anticipated, at the end of the book, Chucha is allowed to speak in her own voice and to address the reader directly giving us a better understanding of her motives and feelings. Through the narrative, for example, we understand that her spells are mainly only prayers which she believes will protect the family against Trujillo's men. Chucha, significantly, delivers her speech when the Garcías escape from the Dominican Republic and because she is a migrant herself, she

⁴⁹ Pedro Luis San Miguel, *The Imagined Island: History, Identity and Utopia in Hispaniola* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 39.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Michele Wucker, *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1999), 49.

is able to foresee the experience of the García girls in the States: “I see their future, the troublesome life ahead. They will be haunted by what they do and don’t remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive” (223). She empathises with the family because being a migrant in the Dominican Republic gives her an insight as to how being an outsider in a country can affect every facet of someone’s life. Chucha, as we have seen, is discriminated against for having an accent, for speaking a different tongue, for having a darker skin colour and for practicing a different religious belief: we have learnt, at this point of the narrative, that these are also important factors in the Garcías’ experience of discrimination in the United States. Natalie Carter sees a similarity between Chucha and the Garcías as that they are both “immigrants.”⁵¹ The critic Jennifer Bess focuses on the Garcías’s relationship with their domestic workers and, in order to understand their contradictory position as underdogs (in the US) and masters (in the Dominican Republic) she invokes the Miranda Complex which she describes as “the condition of occupying the seemingly contradictory roles of victim and heir [of Conquistadors] simultaneously.”⁵² As Dominican migrants in the United States, the Garcías are “victims” but they are also “victimisers” due to their position of power and privilege in the Dominican Republic. Yet, this paradigm and the comparison between Chucha and the Garcías which Alvarez seems to encourage is valid only to a point as there are crucial differences between the predicament of a servant and massacre survivor of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic and the situation of a Dominican doctor in New York who can benefit from family wealth and important connections both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. As we have seen, from a purely practical perspective, the Garcías ultimately manage to secure a decent lifestyle and a proper education for their daughters while Chucha is left behind and it is not altogether clear what happens to her after the sudden relocation of the Garcías in the United States. Alvarez’s comparison, therefore, might be seen as forced or misguided, and testifies, implicitly, to an unfair distribution of privileges.

Alvarez’s novel, however, identifies the diversity brought by migrants as a source of creativity and inspiration. At the end of the novel, Yolanda-the-writer gives credit to the role played by the maids of Haitian descent in her writings. Yolanda, in fact, brings to the fore the influence of Pila, who stole and ran away from the family and used to recite a lot of folk tales to little Yolanda. Significantly, Pila is described as Haitian “though obviously, only half” (279). Yolanda’s comment throws a light on the politics of exclusion with respect to those of mixed-

⁵¹ Natalie Carter, “Kittens in the Oven: Race Relations, Traumatic Memory, and the Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*,” *Rupkatha Journal* v.2, no. 3 (2010): 327.

⁵² Jennifer Bess, “Imploding the Miranda Complex in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*,” *College Literature* v. 34, No.1 (Winter 2007): 79.

ancestry: if she was only “half” Haitian, Pila was also ‘half’ Dominican but the privileging of her Haitian background is instrumental to Pila’s association with “story devils and story ghosts and her trances and her being mounted by spirits. All these spirits, she claimed, lived in the coal shed” (280). When Pila left the family, the six-year-old Yolanda believed that the shed was haunted by Pila and associates the former maid with a little kitten she had found in the shed and brought home before it should have been separated from its mother. When the little kitten’s protracted meowing made her feel uncomfortable, Yolanda threw it out of the window, hoping that it would find its way back to its mother: after the fall, it walked slowly and weakly away, and finally disappeared in the darkness. This incident, we are told, played an important part in the development of Yolanda’s creativity as an adult.

I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia. There are still times I wake up at three o’clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art (290).

I suggest here that the narrator – Yolanda - feels a sense of gratitude for the creativity that has been sparked in her by Pila or Chucha; a legacy which helped her to voice her own stories, and her feelings of displacement. The “violation at the center of [her] art” can be seen as her acknowledgement of the social injustice which underpins the privilege that has made her life so much more comfortable than her maids’ as well as a way of reminding the readers of the violation she had also suffered as a woman in a patriarchal society and as a Dominican migrant in the United States. Significantly, Alvarez mentions in her essays that when she was a little girl in the Dominican Republic, she spent a lot of time with her maids and learnt their stories; she goes as far as saying that while she was influenced by her aunts, her “deepest identification was not with any of these *tías* but with the maids.”⁵³ Like Yolanda, therefore, Alvarez appears inspired and grateful to those who were the primary sources of her creativity but, significantly, the possibility of “identification” with the maids here seems to be limited to a shared passion for story-telling rather than with any other aspect of their (very different) lives.

Alvarez, however, returns to Yolanda’s relationship with her maids and to the fact that the migrant’s experience can work well as a source of inspiration and creativity for the writer *in ¡Yo!*

⁵³Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 154.

(1997), the sequel to *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, which focuses on the alienation experienced by the migrant writer within his/her own family. We are told that as a young girl, Yolanda used to hang around with the maids to listen to their stories, prompting her mother Laura to complain: “she seemed to like to hang around [the maids] more than she did her own kin” (22). In both her books, Alvarez ultimately suggests (not unproblematically) that, despite obvious differences, a migrant from an elite Dominican family (like herself) can share in the experience of those who are discriminated against in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion or class in the Dominican Republic or in the United States. Overall, therefore, Alvarez depicts the experience of migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States as a traumatic but also liberating experience that allows the migrant to cross the limitations set by class boundaries and to form a critique of the social conventions that inform these boundaries.

¡Yo! consists of sixteen chapters divided into three parts and an epilogue. The chapters are told in the voices of different first- and third-person narrators in the form of a series of loosely connected short stories. While none of the chapters is narrated by Yo, the short form of the name Yolanda, the second-youngest daughter in the García family who has become a published writer, the chapters revolve around the relationship between her and these various narrators. They are, as Alvarez implies, based on people who criticised her in real life. After publishing *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, in fact, Alvarez received a lot of criticism from those closest to her: “a couple of cousins were not talking to me [...] My uncle was miffed at something on page forty-four.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Yo’s career as a writer alienates her from her family: she is cut off after the publication of her first successful novel, a fictionalised version of her family’s life. Yo’s cousin Lucinda seeks to undermine Yo for being a writer stating that Yo “lives [her] life mostly on paper” (53). Lucinda, however, is dismissed continuously as the “hair-and-nails cousin,” a nickname which aims to undermine Lucinda’s intelligence and her criticism of her ‘educated’ cousin. Overall, her relatives accuse her of lying about the facts instead of accepting the book as a work of fiction. Yo’s mother goes to the extreme of taking Yo to court for publishing a story about her private life. Yo defends herself explaining that fiction is “based on [her] own experience, like all fiction” (9).

¡Yo! repeatedly examines how writing can cause tensions because of the ‘authority’ that the writer assumes in order to produce his/her work and the sense of entitlement s/he feels in ‘editing’ reality. In the chapter entitled “The Stranger”, an old illiterate Dominican lady called Consuelo asks Yo, who is living in Santo Domingo at the time, to write a letter on her behalf to

⁵⁴Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 125.

her daughter Ruth. The daughter lives in the United States with an abusive husband, whom she cannot divorce because she will risk losing her visa and, in consequence, her job which supports her little daughter and her mother Consuelo in the Dominican Republic. Unsurprisingly, Consuelo dictates a letter to Yo asking Ruth to “honor” her husband (106) but Yo intervenes with her own advice:

“If I were you, I definitely would not advise her to stay with a man who abuses her,” the lady [Yo] was saying, “but, I mean, you write what you want.” “You have reason,” [Consuelo] said to the lady. “Let us say so to my Ruth.” She had meant for the lady’s words to be added to the ones that had already been written. But the lady crumbled the sheet in her hand and commenced a new letter (108).

Sadly, Yo’s advice fails to keep Ruth in her job and, once again, the reality of this privileged migrant writer is shown as to be starkly different from the reality of other, more disadvantaged, migrants. This is also evident in the story of Sarita, the daughter of Primitiva, the Garcías’ Dominican maid who followed them in their American home. As a new-comer to the United States, Sarita was not able to explain herself in English and was thought by other students to be from a rich family. These misconceptions inspired a young Yo to dedicate the topic of her homework, a school report, to Sarita’s ‘false’ life. Sarita felt objectified when she was turned into a character in Yo’s report and, as a form of defiance, she stole the report, jeopardising her mother’s job, their residency at the Garcías and her visa. Primitiva, we are told, was always afraid of being sacked and deported: “one wrong move [she tells her daughter] and both of us would be on a plane home to poverty and hard work” (68). While Primitiva and Laura García de la Torre or Sarita and Yo are all Dominican migrants, they obviously are not socially equal and Sarita perceives Yo’s interest in her to be condescending: later she declares that the García girls “treated [her] like a combination of favourite doll, baby sister, and goodwill project” (57). Sarita, we are told, goes on to become a successful orthopaedist for several sports clinics. When Yo comes to visit her in the clinic after many years of not seeing each other, Sarita (mis)interprets the visit as the result of Yo’s feelings of guilt towards her and her mother. Sarita also feels proud that she is rich and living the life her mother wanted her to have and criticises Yo’s career as not financially profitable, thinking of her as a “starving writer, sometime teacher, in a cheap Jersey dress”(72). This meeting between Sarita and Yo further stresses the separation between Yo and

Dominican Americans who originally come from a working class background: Sarita, in fact, believes that the García girls would never really understand her life or that of her mother's.

While *Yo!* can be seen also as a meditation on the writer's exploitative relationship with his/her subjects, it works eventually to show Yo in an advantageous light. No matter what role Yo plays in the lives of others, all the stories end by focusing on how she has helped them, and so every story becomes an endorsement of the supposedly absent protagonist. For example, when Yo goes to the Dominican Republic to one of her writing retreats, she stays at her uncle's compound. There she meets Sergio, a servant who has been working for the family for a long time, and his wife María, also a servant in the compound. After one of her children dies in the swimming pool in the uncle's compound, María refuses to leave her own house and to resume work. Yo gradually convinces María to come back to the compound and to allow Yo to teach her other children how to swim. The novel suggests that María changes her attitude because Yo treats her as an equal, unlike the rest of Yo's extended family. Yo believes in equality between her and the servants in the compound and acts accordingly: for example, she asks Sergio to call her by her first name and to speak his mind and dismisses sentences the servants use to show submission such as "you're the one who knows" (118). It is clear that Yo is aware of her social status (and also enjoys the privilege of being the 'writer in residence' in her uncle's wealthy villa) but she is uncomfortable whenever she is treated as superior: "no, no, no, you are not at my orders [...] I don't give orders!" (129). The critic Sirias also points out that Yo treats them as "equals" and "eradicates the barriers between classes" because she talks to them with "respect".⁵⁵ Arguably, however, as a returning migrant to the Dominican Republic from New York, Yo does show better understanding of the working class in the Dominican Republic than the rest of her family but it is also evident that, given her condition of 'visitor,' that she can afford to eliminate 'barriers' while this would be much more problematic to do for her relatives who instead live permanently in the Dominican Republic.

Unlike the story of Sarita which leaves a bitter taste in the reader's mouth, other stories included in the book sound unrealistically forgiving towards Yo. For example, we are told that Yo has to endure an unfair number of difficulties to get academic tenure because she is a Latina writer: we learn that, partly in the hope of securing tenure, she plagiarises a short story by one of her former students called Lou Castellucci. When Lou sees an improved version of his story published under Yo's name in a magazine, he thinks of reporting the author for plagiarism. Yo's story, however, helps to fix Lou's relationship with his wife. Lou and his wife grew apart

⁵⁵ Sirias, 104, 96.

because of his long hours of work but when they read together the story plagiarised by Yo, they feel a renewed connection as the wife deeply admires ‘Lou’s’ story. At the end, Lou accepts that Yo gave the story more life because of her skills as a writer. The fact that Yo eventually gets tenure thanks, also, to this plagiarised story, is considered by Sirias as a “proof of Yo’s resolve” because she is “the only Latina woman in an academic community that is culturally homogeneous.”⁵⁶ Sirias, however, ignores the role of plagiarism in Yo’s success when he praises her ability to overcome the obstacle of being a foreigner in the United States. Sirias’ willingness to ‘forget’ (or forgive) Yo’s plagiarism might be a result of the fact that readers are made to believe that they are reading stories about Yo written or told by other characters. Sirias, in fact, suggests that “Yo los[es] control of the story telling process”⁵⁷ and the critic Johnson explains that “the structure and narrative viewpoints of *¡Yo!* undermine [...] hierarchies of exclusion by giving at least sixteen people a voice,” none of which belongs to the protagonist.⁵⁸ As the narration proceeds, however, as I have already pointed out, the novel shows increasing sympathy, admiration and acceptance of the important social role played by the absent protagonist writer, a fact that should invite us to question Sirias’s and Johnson’s assertions. In the final chapter, for example, Yo reconciles herself with the dominant patriarchal authority, represented by her father, Carlos who has been in disagreement with his daughter for many years over her decision to become a writer. In this chapter, Carlos is writing a letter to Yo, who is depressed over missing the chance to have children. In his letter, Carlos’ opposition to Yo’s choice of career is replaced with approval, as he accepts the importance of writing in remembering the past, admitting that his own memory can betray reality. The fact that Carlos strives to maintain his Dominican cultural heritage in the diaspora makes him more grateful for Yo’s writing, which he values as it transfers the older generations’ stories, heritage and history to future generations. He finally blesses Yo’s writing, calling her books his “grandchildren” (309). I agree with Suárez when she explains that Yo: “uses the last story to reconcile with her father by creating a fiction in which he encourages her work”⁵⁹ but I would also argue that the stories narrated by other characters are actually, in a sense, always narrated by the writer Yo who is not only readily identifiable with Alvarez herself but also, in her search for acceptance, creates a series of fictions in which she can choose her own stories.

⁵⁶ Sirias, 96.

⁵⁷ Sirias, 91.

⁵⁸ Jonson, 38.

⁵⁹ Lucía M. Suárez, “Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* v. 5, no. 1 (2004): 137.

Overall, however, Carlos' validation reminds one of the crucial role played by Dominican traditions in the development of Yo (and Alvarez) as a migrant writer who tries to negotiate between two rich linguistic and cultural heritages and between different ways of understanding the interplay of class, gender, race, or ethnicity. Alvarez has explained that as a migrant writer, she does not fall under the category of either American or Dominican; instead, she describes herself as "a Dominican American writer."⁶⁰ She further explains that this description states that she belongs to a hybrid country in which she can simultaneously be part of the United States and the Dominican Republic. A sense of separation from both of these countries is what gives her the perspective she needs to be a writer, namely "being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side."⁶¹ Thus, with her writing, Alvarez believes she is creating a new place "a country that's not on the map" and to which she is seeking to give a form of material existence.⁶² The act of writing allows Alvarez to embrace her in-between status which she reinterprets not as a form of exclusion from both countries but as her declaration that, ultimately, she belongs with her own imagination, and provides her with a space in which she can create a world or a 'home' which lives on the page. Unlike Yolanda, the protagonist of Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*, the novel at the core of my next chapter, comes from an uneducated, working class family and which lives in a destitute part of Brooklyn. We will see how Pérez offers another fictional reading of a Dominican American female migrant experience by focusing on a different type of 'outsider': while the main character is not a writer like Yolanda, she is the first member of her family to attend university. Pérez's protagonist, as we will see, is concerned with reinventing the meaning of 'home' in a way that challenges the exclusion she faces in American society but also within her family.

⁶⁰Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

⁶¹Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

⁶²Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

Chapter Two

Homes of the Mind:

Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999)

Chapter one had at its core Alvarez's narratives of a specific experience, namely the experience of members of the Dominican elite who migrated to the United States at the very end of Trujillo's dictatorship to escape political persecution. As anticipated, Loida Maritza Pérez's only novel *Geographies of Home* (1999)⁶³ sheds light on a very different reality as it tells the story of a working class Dominican American family who moves to the United States only a few years after the Garcías but for economic rather than political reasons. As the title suggests, *Geographies of Home* is a protracted exploration of the notion of 'home' and, in particular, of what 'home' represents for the novel's protagonist, Iliana, and her family. Unlike the members of Alvarez's García family who, after the death of Trujillo often travel and spend time in the Dominican Republic, Iliana's relatives, due to financial constraints, never have the opportunity to return to their native Dominican Republic; the narrative, in fact, plays out almost entirely in the United States, punctuated occasionally by distant flashbacks to the Dominican Republic. This particular family's move to the United States, therefore, involves a complete separation from the Dominican Republic, to the extent that there is no contact between the nuclear family in the United States and the extended family back on the island. In *Geographies of Home*, in fact, the extended family plays no role in Iliana's and her family's life after migration, a fact that further distances this novel from Alvarez's work which displays instead numerous interactions between those who lived in the United States and those who had stayed back 'home'. 'Home' – in the sense of place of origin – is therefore beyond the reach of Pérez's characters and, as a result of this sharp division between the Dominican Republic and the United States, the use of the word 'home' in the narrative is largely restricted to the physical place of the American household, while broader concepts of 'home' – for example, neighbourhood (Brooklyn) city (New York) or country (United States) also lie beyond the reach of most of the characters, who, as we will see, do not feel they belong to the wider society which surrounds them in any meaningful way. The characters' sense of alienation in the United States and their concomitant distance from the Dominican Republic reflects, to some extent, the author's own: as she has herself pointed out, Pérez feels marginalised in both countries and is considered "neither authentically Dominican

⁶³ Loida Maritza Pérez, *Geographies of Home* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1999). Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses in the text.

nor American.”⁶⁴ In this respect, Pérez’s choice of a third-person narrative voice is significant: while the focus of the narration is mainly on Iliana and Aurelia (her mother), it is an omniscient observer who recounts the stories of all the family members. This outsider’s perspective highlights to the reader Iliana’s own feelings as an outsider within her own family and in her own ‘home’.

The ‘home’ that Pérez constructs in the narrative is a complex one. Pérez describes the physical Dominican-American home of Iliana as a limiting place, governed by specific power structures and ideologies related to race, class, religion, and gender which oppress some of its members and compromise their independence. In their attempts to adapt to the culture of the United States, the characters, all first-generation migrants, are restricted by the cultural norms of their country of origin (which, despite its physical remove is all too present in other ways) and, as a devoted Seventh-Day Adventists, by the dictates of their religion. As it was the case for Alvarez, Pérez brings several elements of her life experiences into the novel. Loida Maritza Pérez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1963 to a working class family which migrated to the United States when she was three years old, during the United States occupation and civil war of 1965-66.⁶⁵ Pérez studied English at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, graduating in 1987 and currently teaches at New Mexico University. She won many prizes and fellowships for her short stories and her novel *Geographies of Home*, whose protagonist arrives in New York at the age of three, when her family decides to look for better opportunities abroad during the political troubles of 1965-66.

Iliana is nineteen when the novel begins. We learn that she has spent a year and a half at university, but has decided to intermit her studies and return to the family home. Her decision, we are told, has been prompted by a ghostly voice, which she assumes is that of her mother, calling her to come home to support her sister Marina, who is struggling with mental health problems. The family to which she returns, comprises the parents - Papito and Aurelia – and their fourteen children, most of whom have left the family home, have their own families but are regularly in touch with their parents and siblings. The novel consists of a prologue and forty chapters, focussing mainly on the parents and three of the daughters: Rebecca, the oldest of the siblings who is stuck in an abusive marriage; Marina, who suffers from severe psychological

⁶⁴ Edwidge Danticat, et al., “Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Perez, Myriam JA Chancy, and Nelly Rosario,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* v. 5, no. 1 (2004): 75.

⁶⁵ Antonio Olliz-Boyd, “An Aesthetic Experience The Reality of Phenotypes and Racial Awareness in Dominican Literature Julia Alvarez and Loida Maritza Pérez,” in *The Latin American Identity and the African Diaspora: Ethnogenesis in Context* (NY: Cambria Press, 2010), 184.

problems; and Iliana, the youngest of the sisters and the first and only female in the family who goes to university.

As soon as Iliana arrives at home, she is forced to question the concept of home as a place of rest and safety as Marina, during a hallucinatory episode, attempts to burn down the family house. Marina blames her parents for her mental instability because, when they migrated to the United States, they initially left her behind with her mother's sister together with her siblings Beatriz and Manuel. Unlike the García who moved to the United States all at the same time, Iliana's family arrived at different stages. The oldest sister Rebecca was the first one who, at the age of twenty-one, decided to migrate. Rebecca's desire to leave for the United States was provoked by the stories of those who went before and their descriptions of their new country as a place where dreams of fortune and wealth could come true: "she had honestly believed that she would be able to pick gold off the streets and send for her parents so they might live grandly as those who returned to the Dominican Republic claimed was possible" (59). Rebecca's dream, however, is undermined shortly after her arrival to the United States when she "realized that those who moved to the States lived as miserably as most in her own country" (59). Pérez here underlines how the stories of success told by Dominican migrants, who often fictionalise their lives, encouraged others to follow. Pérez explores the factors which 'pull' migrants to the United States, but also those which 'push' them away from their native home. According to Rebecca, the most important reason for migrating to the United States was the political chaos which followed Trujillo's assassination in 1961 and culminated, a few years later with the second United States occupation of the Dominican Republic and the civil war. Nevertheless, the United States of the 1960s as depicted in the novel, did not provide the arriving Dominicans with the security they needed because they were always being threatened with deportation: as the narrator puts it, "one of the few advantages of emigrating was escaping riots and military raids, but even this was often overshadowed by a fear of deportation" (60-1).

Shortly after her arrival in the United States, Rebecca, being technically an illegal migrant herself, appoints a lawyer to get her parents and some of her siblings green cards. As noted above, Aurelia and Papito, eager to join their daughter, leave three of their children (Beatriz, Marina, and Gabriel) with Aurelia's sister, hoping to find a way to bring them to the United States in the future. Once they are there, unlike the Garcías in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Aurelia and Papito do not receive any financial support from their extended families in the Dominican Republic. On the contrary, when Marina, Beatriz and Manuel eventually arrive in the United States, Aurelia finds out that her sister, the only person she could trust, had neglected

them, keeping them in a chicken coop where they became seriously ill. At the same time she used the money she received from Aurelia for herself and her family:

Parasites had grown snake-size in [the children's] intestines to later wriggle free as each child strained to defecate [...] her sister, whom she had trusted to do right, had housed all three children in a chicken coop and barely clothed or fed them (32).

The children's separation from their parents and the poor conditions in which they were kept in the Dominican Republic have a traumatic effect, particularly on Marina; as Simone Aguiar insists, Marina's feelings of being abandoned in the Dominican Republic "increases her self-fragmentation" and her paranoia.⁶⁶ Once the three remaining children reach the United States, the poor treatment they suffered at the hands of their aunt ensures the family's complete and permanent separation from their relatives in the Dominican Republic. This schism also forces the family to embrace their American house as their only home, one organised under Papito's patriarchal religious beliefs.

Pérez investigates the way in which the religious beliefs of the Dominican family at the centre of her narrative are modified within the environment of the United States. To understand the way in which migration influenced the continuity of these beliefs, it is necessary to examine them in detail, and trace them back to their roots in the Dominican Republic. Pérez portrays a particularly diverse religious background for the family in the novel, with the characters of Papito and Aurelia springing from two religious traditions, both of which provide alternatives to the religious Catholic majority of the Dominican Republic. While Aurelia comes from a family which believes in African-derived folk traditions, the father converts at a young age from Catholicism to Seventh-Day Adventism, a belief he imposes later on his wife and children. Pérez's decision to focus on Seventh-Day Adventism challenges the stereotypical view of Dominicans being uniformly Catholic but also enables Pérez to explore and capitalise upon the intransigence of Protestantism in relation to alternative forms of spirituality:

because Latinos are usually portrayed as Catholic, I wanted to delve into one of the Protestant and increasingly proselytized religions such as that of Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventist, —Mormonism, Pentecostalism, or whatever.

⁶⁶ Simone A. Aguiar, "Traumatic Dislocations in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*," in *Trauma Narratives and History*, ed. Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36.

Choosing the most restrictive of these religions enabled me to provide more of a *contrast* with alternate forms of spirituality and folk religion.⁶⁷ [My italics]

In the Dominican Republic, in fact, Catholicism and folk religions do not necessarily contradict or eliminate each other. Derby describes the ‘flexibility’ of Catholicism in the Dominican Republic in these terms: “official Christianity never quite succeeded in stamping out the marvellous as it did in other contexts [or Caribbean countries], and a popular brand of Catholicism flourished which drew liberally upon Afro-Dominican and Haitian vodou.”⁶⁸ African-originated folk religions, however, have been demonised in the Dominican Republic, and generally associated with Haiti and Haitians despite the fact that they are also widely practiced by Dominicans. When Papito, goes to Azua as a young Adventist missionary, he meets Aurelia and convinces her that her mother, who is a practitioner of an African-derived folk religion, is in fact worshipping the devil. Importantly, partly due to the stigma they carry, these African-originated religions are not practiced in public but mostly associated with home.⁶⁹ Unlike Christian religions, where the man is the head of the house with an almost ‘divine’ authority, women of Afro-syncretic beliefs are very powerful and they can be “spiritual leaders” just like men.⁷⁰ As a result, when Aurelia leaves behind her religion and her mother’s heritage in order to marry Papito and embrace his belief, she gives up entirely also her power and authority as female within the family home because, unlike Catholicism, Protestant forms of belief resist the intermingling with African folk religion in any form.

The demonisation of Dominicans who practice African-originated religions continues in the United States, where, through her exposure to the Adventist church teachings, little Iliana spots on her mother some signs of a ‘devilish’ nature: “those ears, with holes pierced during a past Aurelia rarely spoke of, had both frightened and intrigued her. Raised in a religion which condemned as pagan the piercing of body parts, she had imagined that, were her mother’s clogged holes pried open, she would transform into a sorceress dancing” (3). Aurelia’s pierced body here stands as a permanent reminder of her suppressed and denied past and her (apparent) repudiation of her family heritage is challenged by her lingering body image, which she cannot change or modify. Moreover, even after ‘converting’ to the religion of her husband, despite the

⁶⁷ Loida Maritza Pérez, “Penguin Books Reading Guide Geographies of Home Loida Maritza Perez,” <<http://www.penguin.com/read/book-clubs/geographies-of-home/9780140253719>> (accessed on 25/04/2015).

⁶⁸ Derby, 215.

⁶⁹ Howard suggests that “the household is an important location for the expression of Afro-syncretic beliefs, which are practiced away from the public”, 90.

⁷⁰ Howard, 93.

fact that “God was the one spirit she wanted to believe in, not the spirits of her mother”, Aurelia continues to feel the presence of her mother’s “spirits” “as tangibly as she did the breezes” (133) because she has inherited her mother’s ability to connect with the metaphysical world and to hear the whispers of the spirits. Despite her apparent submission to her husband’s religion, therefore, Aurelia seems to refuse to completely disconnect from her mother’s belief: her decision to sleep naked, in fact, is her way to re-connect with her mother’s religion by resorting to the world of dreams where her husband cannot condemn her: “nights were the only times her body breathed freely, she had often claimed, unwilling to admit what her husband already knew – that, like her mother, she too believed that garments confined her dreams”(163). Overall, an uneasy compromise exists between Papito and Aurelia: he understands that she is prepared to accept Adventism in an outward, public sense, while she still believes in her mother’s religion deep inside. In other words, Aurelia accepts Papito’s role as a patriarch but only up to a point.

It is significant that Papito’s experiences during Trujillo’s dictatorship strengthened his belief in God. During Trujillo’s rule, Papito silently protested against the regime by refusing to hang up a portrait of the dictator who had killed many of his friends and family. As Alvarez, amongst others, has pointed out, during Trujillo’s regime “images of the dictator hung in every house next to the crucifix and la Virgencita with the declaration beneath: *In this house Trujillo is Chief.*”⁷¹ Alvarez also highlights that Trujillo held mass baptisms for hundreds of babies, claiming the role of godfather and the father of the nation at the same time: “the padrino relationship is sacrosanct: the godfather, in effect, joins the family as a cofather, com-padre. By aligning himself to hundreds of families, Trujillo was ensuring the loyalty of his compadre-countrymen.”⁷² In this context, Papito’s refusal to have the dictator’s portrait in his house was a way of (re)claiming his own authority over his own family instead of Trujillo’s. When the regime’s soldiers came searching Papito’s house to make sure that the picture of Trujillo was displayed, one of them mistook the unlit candles which were kept for an electricity blackout for “candles lit in honor of El Capitán” (147) and did not question Papito any further. While many disappeared and were murdered, Papito saw his survival as miraculous and believed that he could have been spared only because of a miracle by God: “to him, God was more than an invisible entity to Whom he prayed [...] God, in His mercy, had performed miracles that had literally saved his life” (146-7). Papito also believed that it was God himself “who had provided visas for him and his entire family at a time when throngs of Dominicans had been denied exit from their country; God Who had then led him to employers interested in his skills; God Who

⁷¹ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 104.

⁷² Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 119.

had provided his family with a home of their own on the eve of their eviction” (147). Papito’s fear to be left without a roof for his family and his constant financial insecurity further intensify his religious beliefs: because of the precariousness of his situation and his lack of control, his only comfort is to trust religion to guide him.

Pérez uses the character of Papito to examine an archetype of the migrant experience: the patriarch who, faced with a new culture in a new country which he perceives to be corrupt and corrupting, staunchly strives to protect his traditional beliefs and to keep his family within a specific cultural and ethical framework. Papito’s religious fervour is partly driven by the fact that he fears for his children’s moral wellbeing: “wary lest his daughters wind up whores and his sons in jail, he had wielded religion as sword and shield in their defense” (146). Aurelia allows him control of the family because of his perceived ability to protect and provide: “it was he who had sought employment in the New York they both feared. He who had guarded their family against the city’s violence” (146). When Aurelia first arrived in the United States, in fact, she felt so scared that she could not leave the house and, due to her fear of the new country, she refused to have any food to the point that the doctors feared that she was going to die. Ultimately, Aurelia only survived in the United States because she preserved her motherly instinct and was determined not to abandon her children to grow up in an alien culture alone.⁷³ Feeling threatened by the outside world, therefore, Aurelia established a stronger connection with the small place where she lived, her family home; her withdrawal to the inside of her house exhibits the centrality of the idea of ‘home’ as the only place where, as a female migrant, she, along with her children, could feel safe.

Pérez chooses the place where she grew up herself, a poor part of Brooklyn, to be the area where Aurelia and her family settle. From 1950 to 1970, due to the deteriorating conditions of Brooklyn houses and buildings, the area witnessed a decrease in the white population, mostly Germans and Irish migrants. Craig Steven Wilder states that in those twenty years “more than a half million white residents left Brooklyn while the borough gained about 20,000 non-white people every twelve months. The influx of African Americans and Puerto Ricans reached 1,000 newcomers each week in the late 1950s.”⁷⁴ The settlement of Dominicans in Brooklyn neighbourhoods dates back to the early 1960s and, initially, the number of Dominicans was

⁷³ The novel explains that Aurelia, “terrified to step outside and claustrophobic in the three-room apartment shared with Papito and their children, [...] had deteriorated to a skeletal eighty-one pounds. Only the realization that her children would be left motherless in a country whose language and customs she still barely understood had inched her toward health in defiance of the doctors’ prediction that she would die” (24).

⁷⁴ Craig Steven Wilder, “Vulnerable People, Undesirable Places,” in *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 212.

small in comparison to other minority groups such as African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. Duany reports that “Dominicans congregated on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, and, increasingly, in the Upper Manhattan neighborhoods of Washington Heights and Inwood.”⁷⁵ Overall, Brooklyn provided the new inhabitants with cheap houses and jobs in the factories close-by and we are told that Iliana’s family chooses Brooklyn precisely because of the presence of factories. Marina remembers her and her sisters working in the factories regardless of their young age: “in that part of Brooklyn, where immigrants eked out a sort of life and employers sought cheap labor, the existence of underage workers was quite common” (96). Members of the Brooklyn Seven-Day Adventist also facilitated Marina’s and her siblings’ employment in Brooklyn factories: for example, the clothes factory where Marina used to work as a child was owned by a church elder who allowed children to work part-time. The Adventist church also gives Papito a part-time job selling religious books and, overall, the church provides the family with the only community they are connected to.

Iliana, however, felt excluded from the Adventist church from a young age because, at the age of seven, she started to doubt her own religious beliefs. One day, Iliana pretended to be sick in order to skip school and her mother took her to the doctor, who, to Iliana’s utmost surprise, decided that her appendix should be removed. After being hospitalised for four days, the doctors found out that Iliana’s appendix was in fact healthy. Her father believed that his daughter had been healed without surgery because of another miracle and donated flowers to the church every Saturday for a year. The pastor himself portrayed Iliana as an example of God’s mercy and power but after this ‘incident’, Iliana started to doubt any kind of authority which could be deceived by a little girl: “more than realizing the disastrous consequences of lying, she had discovered that authorities, as personified by her parents, the doctors and the pastor, were not as knowledgeable as she’d believed” (10). Iliana, therefore, started to consider her own ‘existential’ questions but, afraid of her father’s disapproval of her doubts, she kept her questions private: “throughout the years,” in fact “her father had silenced any questions that challenged life as he perceived it [and] she had learned to agree with everything he said while secretly composing answers of her own” (10). In other words, like her mother before her, Iliana learnt very quickly how to hide who she was in order to fit into the ideas of home and family constructed by her father. As a result, rather than being the place where one can be true to oneself, home becomes a place where one is forced to construct a façade because of the oppressive imposition of rules. At the same time, however, Pérez allows the reader to see the

⁷⁵ Duany, 55.

situation from the point of view of those who impose the rules – like Papito. The narrative reveals that Papito can only claim his own sense of ‘home’ by protecting it from the confusion of the outside world, and the alienation he feels from the mainstream American society.

The novel also shows how, within Brooklyn, not all migrants shared the same living conditions. Puerto Ricans, as it was the case in Alvarez’s novel, are depicted as more assimilated to American society and more settled financially. As an eight-year-old child, Iliana feels her home to be stricter, and perhaps less assimilated to American culture than the home of her Puerto Rican school friends, a girl called Lily and her brother Pepe: while she needs to think carefully about what she says in front of her parents, her friends talk to their parents less formally, “as if they were friends” (184). Iliana also painfully realises that Santa Claus brings many gifts to her Puerto Rican little friends while she receives none: through a child’s eyes, Iliana does not understand that the financial burden of so many children (fifteen) makes life very hard for her parents and feels neglected by her family. When, for the first time, Iliana does get a gift for Christmas, she feels disappointed that it is not the exact doll she wanted and destroys it completely. Overall, the school does not provide Iliana with a group of peers she can feel she belongs to: Iliana is frustrated by the fact that few of her high school classmates know anything about the Dominican Republic and feels alienated by Latin Americans and African Americans alike. While Dominicans may share characteristics with African Americans, as in the case of Iliana who has dark skin, they are still different from African Americans for using Spanish. Pérez dwells on Iliana’s yearning to belong to either of the two groups: “during her years in that apartment on Pennsylvania Avenue and in that neighborhood where few other Dominicans had resided, she had yearned to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she could be easily identified as belonging to either group” (190-1). Pérez here explores the confusion felt by Dominicans, especially those with dark skin colour: for example, African Americans in Iliana’s school criticise her for saying she is a Latina, assuming that “she claimed to be Hispanic in order to put on airs” (191). Iliana, however, also felt very uncomfortable with the fact that, unlike her Puerto Rican friends, she did not speak English with her family: “the first time Iliana had visited them she had been shocked to discover that English was the language they spoke at home” (183-4). Eventually, Iliana comes to “hate” her family, who only speak Spanish, and are unable to speak English out in the city (185-6). Overall, Iliana’s family are portrayed as clearly isolated from mainstream American society through the failure of Iliana’s parents to master the language of their new country. Language plays an important role in Papito’s work environment: his boss, also a Dominican, always reminds him that if he does not perform well there are many

unskilled labourers who do not speak English properly who would be more than happy to do Papito's job: "we may be from the same town, but don't think I'm going to risk my ass just so I can save yours. [...] You're lucky you have a job. You know how many people need one? If I fired you, there'd be a line around the block" (231). Pérez further underlines the fact that Papito's age, coupled with his inability to speak English, put him in a very disadvantaged position: when his manager, another Dominican American who spoke better English, treated him unfairly, "Papito [...] swallowed his pride and thanked the man for not firing him on the spot. He was fully aware that at his age with his lack of English he'd be hard-pressed to find another job" (232). *Geographies of Home*, therefore, undermines the notion of the migrant community as a safe 'home' since those migrants who had been able to secure better positions soon became accomplices in the exploitation of their countrymen and women who had the skills for their jobs but were not able to communicate in English and needed a mediator/translator in a competitive labour market.

Geographies of Home also highlights how the American educational system fails to inspire the students of colour to continue with their studies by giving them fewer opportunities and discouraging them from applying to universities. Iliana's high school advisor, for example, recommends that she does not apply to university because her application would be rejected based on her skin colour: "people outside the city are not like us," the counsellor says, "even just upstate they're—well—you know—racist. They won't want you there" (66). Iliana, however, ignores the counsellor's advice and instead pins her hopes on finally finding a 'home' in an elite university where she hopes not to be discriminated against according to her looks, but judged on her character and intellectual abilities. The youngest of her sisters, Iliana is the only woman in her family who is allowed, by her parents, to go to university. Papito's strict rules meant that her older sisters were not allowed to live on their own far away from home. In contrast, Iliana, with the help of her brother Vincinte, "eventually persuaded her parents that it was respectable, even desirable, for a single woman in the United States to abandon home for school" (43). The fact that her parents change their opinion about women's education illustrates that they are beginning to adapt to the American culture. Pérez here explores a common trend among Dominican American girls in the 1980s and 1990s, namely their focus on academic studies as a way of escaping family restrictions and find an alternative home. The sociologist Patricia Pessar has pointed out how "daughters sometimes channel[led] their resentment of over-protective parents into their studies. Their goal [wa]s to leave home after high school and attend a distant

university.”⁷⁶ It is no coincidence that Iliana chooses a university which is five hours away by train from New York City, ensuring that her parents will not be able to visit her (1).

Unfortunately, distance from her family does not give Iliana peace of mind and the university does not provide her with the alternative ‘home’ she was looking for before leaving New York. As a matter of fact, she finds university as difficult as she did high school and is very dissatisfied with her first experience of living within a predominantly white community. At the beginning of her academic life, Iliana believed that she could achieve a degree of upward social mobility by virtue of being amongst the elite: “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” (71). To her disappointment, however, Iliana soon becomes a victim of racism: strangers in the street call her “nigger” (71), and the same word is posted on her door. Initially Iliana ignores all signs of racism in her university because she is desperate to fit in: “when classmates had presumed to know the inner workings of those of her race and class—inferring their inherent laziness, lack of motivation, welfare dependency and intellectual deficiency—she had stopped up her ears and gradually trained her eyes not to see” (71). The stress and anger caused by her decision to ignore this upsetting reality, however, soon manifests itself in her body: “rage had turned her body against itself, transforming her stomach into an acidic mass that heaved bitterness into her mouth” (71). As in her high school years, Iliana finds that she is not only rejected by the dominant white community but also by other minorities within the university who discriminate against her because they believe that she only dates white men. As a matter of fact, the person Iliana’s classmates assume is her boyfriend is her only friend, a white-Mexican homosexual called Ed, who also feels excluded, especially because he feels he cannot reveal his sexuality to the university community.

While it becomes clear that her attempt to find a new home at university has failed, Iliana realises that she has not really ‘escaped’ her family home either: despite being away from her father, Iliana realises that she is still influenced by his religion, feeling uncomfortable whenever she crosses the line and breaks some of the rules set down in the family home:

Each time she allowed music to sway her body, went to the cinema or even had a sip of coffee, she was hounded by the idea that she risked her eternal soul. It didn’t matter that she had long since stopped believing in God, or at least in the God her

⁷⁶ Patricia R. Pessar, *A Visa for a Dream, Dominicans in the United States* (USA: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 66.

father claimed. The possibility of that God's judgment nevertheless preyed on her fears (11).

A year and a half into her studies, Iliana decides to return home, encouraged by a ghostly voice which she hears in the dormitory and assumes to be that of her mother's, calling her daughter to help with problems at home. Iliana's decision to go back to Brooklyn is the result of both her disappointment with the educational system in the United States and her sense of responsibility towards her family which, she now fully appreciates, is deeply isolated, and therefore deeply vulnerable, in the city. Iliana, however, is well aware that her decision to go back home puts her at risk of losing the independence won during her time away at university: her return to Brooklyn, in fact, means that she must conform to her family traditions and beliefs, and follow the rules set down by her parents: "not only would she have to live according to her father's dictates, she would also have to join him in Bible study, attend church on Saturdays, and listen to his sermons if her face but revealed an expression interpreted as defiant" (8). When she packs her suitcase in preparation for her journey home she sets aside clothes which she thinks will not be approved by her family, in that they challenge the limitations of decency or are not feminine enough like skirts "just above her knees" or "flat shoes [...]" for which she would have been called matronly by sisters who already considered her an old maid" (8). In order to be accepted in the family home, Iliana has to meet certain standards of outward appearance: her clothes should be 'decent' but also exhibit her femininity, so that she will be attractive to men and find a proper husband.

When Iliana comes home, however, she is surprised by the changes that have occurred and by her family's attempts to assimilate with the local neighbourhood; in particular, she notices that they have tried to change their house to make it look more 'American':

Gone were the hand-carved statuettes and worn but sturdy wooden rocking chairs and tables brought from the Dominican Republic [...] Already Iliana felt as if her parents' home were not her own. While she'd been away, her memory had consisted of images imbued with the warmth of a Caribbean sun magically transported to New York and of a house furnished with objects lovingly carved by the inhabitants of an island she had dreamed of (30).

Many factors seem to have contributed to this change. First of all, the grandchildren who were born and are growing up in the United States, the novel suggests, play a crucial role in this transformation: for example, Aurelia knows that she has to offer her grandchildren ‘American’ cheese rather than Dominican food in order to please them. However, also Aurelia’s realisation that Marina’s madness might result from being unable to fit within the United States mainstream society might have contributed to the change: in order to counteract Marina’s sense of dislocation from her immediate surroundings, Aurelia tries to create a home which resembles as much as possible a standard ‘American’ household.⁷⁷ Ironically, while she herself aimed to find her place in the United States beyond her family’s influence, Iliana experiences a sense of loss when she sees that the furniture they brought with them from the Dominican Republic is no longer in the house. Iliana thus appears to harbour conflicting feelings about her family home: if it is the place she longed to escape from because of the oppression she felt as a young girl, she was also counting on her home to remain unchanged, “a place whose permanence she had believed in, her parents and siblings people whom she had expected to find unaltered when she returned” (127). The household in Brooklyn then, at this stage of the narrative, represents what Méndez calls a “microcosm of the Dominican national space”⁷⁸ for those migrants who, nostalgically, often do not want the country they left to change: for Iliana, the family home seems to have somehow replaced the home country, the land she left behind at three years of age and of which she has no clear memory.

Iliana’s return to the family home also brings into sharp focus her emerging thoughts on racism in the United States. Iliana’s experiences at university, in fact, allow her to better understand her own home and its internal dynamics in relation to racism: she remembers how her family have always picked on each other by criticising the characteristics which trace their African ancestry: Marina, for example, “was made fun of her long, wide lips and kinky hair. Beatriz, who was beautiful, was ridiculed for her flat nose” (190). Flat nose, kinky hair and wide lips refer to African features which Iliana’s siblings clearly considered unattractive, revealing a tendency to look down on African traits. This reflects dominant tendencies in Dominican culture where, during Trujillo’s rule, the category of “*indio/a* was established as an official and popular description of Dominican race” in order to establish a link between dark-skinned Dominicans and the indigenous population of Hispaniola whilst occluding the African legacy.⁷⁹ The category ‘indio’ has now become controversial in the Dominican Republic but it is still an official

⁷⁷ The changes within the family home could also metaphorically reflect the increasing United States influence on the 1980s Dominican Republic, an aspect we will explore in further details in the fifth chapter of this thesis.

⁷⁸ Méndez, 169.

⁷⁹ Howard, 41.

category used for identity cards. As a result, when they arrived in the United States as migrants, dark-skinned and mulatto Dominicans who, in their home country would have been officially described as ‘indio’, became aware of being perceived as ‘black’, a category that in the Dominican Republic was traditionally associated with Haitians. The polarisation of race in the United States (the famous ‘one drop rule’), therefore, complicates and further enhances racial tensions already existing in the Dominican Republic. In the novel, the reverberations of racist discourses continue to influence the way in which family members perceive themselves and each other: the first thing Marina asks Iliana when she comes home from the university is if she has “hooked [...] a gorgeous blue-eyed hunk yet” (38). This desire to ‘whiten the race’ in a Dominican context reminds one of the fact that Trujillo invited light-skinned refugees from around the world –Spanish running away from the civil war, Jews escaping from the Nazis, but also Japanese in the aftermath of the Second World War – to relocate and invest in the country in order to ‘whiten’ the nation. When Iliana dismisses Marina’s question, insisting that she does not care about dating a white man, Marina accuses her sister of being prejudiced against the whites: “why? What do you have against white people?” Marina’s question inherently concedes that she does not see herself as part of ‘white people’, but rather as a member of a separate group. Iliana’s dialogue with her sister reveals the issues of colour underpinning the novel:

“I didn’t say I had anything against them. And all whites aren’t blue-eyed.”

Marina snickered. “A big, black stud. That’s what you want.”

“Yeah,” Iliana retorted. “A big-black-man-with-a-great-big-dick. What would be wrong with that if I did?”

“Only that you could do better.”

“Better? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You know how black men are.”

“No, Marina. Tell me.”

“They’re lazy as shit and undependable.” [...]

“What are you saying? That blacks are inferior? Is that what you think about yourself?” (38).

Marina falls back on some of the racist stereotypes promoted by those who uphold white superiority and, significantly, when Iliana presses Marina on the issue of skin colour and race by asking: “what color is your skin?” Marina responds: “I’m Hispanic!” (38). Marina here

circumvents race by defining herself as “Hispanic” and denies, in the process, the multi-racial and multi-ethnic origins of Dominicans. Marina’s answer reflects the attitude of many Dominican Americans who, refusing to be identified within the white/black binary, assign themselves to the ethnicity of “Hispanic”: as Duany points out, they “have become a ‘middle race’ between whites and blacks in the United States”⁸⁰ and, in the novel, this difficult state of in-betweenness seems to have clearly contributed to Iliana’s family sense of alienation, especially for its most vulnerable members.

Marina, in fact, has always struggled with the disparity between the way she saw herself, and the way she was seen within the United States context. As a young secretary in a law firm, Marina hoped she would marry a white attorney. One day, an attorney made a sexual approach towards Marina. Summoning her courage, she told him that unless he proposed, indicating that he wished to marry her, he was not allowed to touch her. The attorney, rebuffed, revealed his true character, allotting her the task of copying a pile of documents as a rebuke. Without any proof, Marina assumed that the attorney rejected her because of her skin colour and began to feel jealous of one of the secretaries in the office who was blonde and white. In order to take revenge against the attorney and the blond secretary, Marina set fire to a pile of documents and, as a result, was summarily fired. After this incident, Marina obsessively focused on her looks, trying to emphasise her Caucasian features: she died her hair a brighter orange and spent her savings on a professional photo shoot in order to apply for modelling jobs. After being turned down by many modelling agencies, Marina came to realise that with no prospective career, or a potential husband, her life was destined to be unhappy. In the novel, the complexity of race comes to a head, and is most vividly illustrated, when Marina claims that she was raped by a, crucially, *dark-skinned* astrologer when she went to him to have her future predicted.

Just like Iliana’s family, we – the readers – cannot establish if this rape actually happened. The rape, however, vividly reoccurs in Marina’s mind whenever she sleeps and every night she struggles against this imaginary black rapist. Failing to defend her body against this rapist, she tries to claim back some control by stating that “no flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger would claim her soul” (17). As Méndez suggests, the image of the rapist reflects Marina’s idea of black as evil, illustrating “her internalized racism”⁸¹ but, arguably, as Lyn Di Lorio Sandin insists, the rapist is also a representation of Marina’s black inner self, which she loathes.⁸² As the

⁸⁰ Duany, 78.

⁸¹ Méndez, 177.

⁸² Lyn Di Lorio Sandin, “‘That Animals Might Speak’: Doubles and The Uncanny in Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*,” in *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 73.

narrative develops, in fact, Marina comes to hate herself more when she cannot cover her black skin colour: “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 [white-American] wife” (18). Marina also attempts to whiten her skin, using strong chemicals (18). Similarly to Sandra in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Marina’s desire to ‘pass’ for white leads her eventually to madness: however, while the ‘Caucasian-looking’ Sandra wants to look more like her darker-skinned sisters, the ‘thick-lipped and kinky-haired’ Marina tries to actively deny her African origins and suppresses an important part of herself with very serious consequences.

Iliana’s return to Brooklyn also throws into focus gender inequality at ‘home’. As we have seen, the superiority of the Dominican male in Iliana’s family is preserved in the United States as Pérez examines the role of women in nourishing the superiority of men, even within new cultural surroundings. Rebecca, who manages to get her family legally to the United States, has to marry Pasi3n in order to take advantage of his American nationality. “As an American citizen,” Su3rez comments, “Pasi3n offers the dream of wealth and security”⁸³: as his wife, Rebecca will not be deported, and he will provide her with a house which will allow her, she thinks, to be independent. The vulnerability of the illegal immigrant is clearly highlighted here but so is another type of weakness because it is evident that, as her husband, Pasi3n also provides Rebecca with social “legitimacy.”⁸⁴ Afraid to end up as a lonely spinster, Rebecca also feels grateful to Pasi3n for saving her from the embarrassment of spinsterhood. Single until her thirties, with two younger married sisters, Rebecca had felt worthless: “as the eldest daughter she should have been the first to marry, to bear children, to be sufficiently settled to provide her sisters with words of wisdom and advice. Instead, she had suffered the humiliation of watching two of them marry before she herself had any prospects” (203). Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that Pasi3n’s constant abuse of his wife and children does not stop Rebecca from faking happiness in front of her family, even when, covered in bruises, she does not seek their protection. When Rebecca’s parents try to save her and offer to take her family home, she refuses to leave Pasi3n and instead blames herself for not being a good wife. A virgin until her thirties, she bemoans the fact that she is unable to fulfil her husband’s sexual demands. Even when Pasi3n ties her to a chair and has sexual intercourse with a younger woman in their own bed, Rebecca still forgives him and blames herself instead. Moreover, Pasi3n’s sustained inability to support his family results in the three children suffering from starvation and sickness

⁸³ Su3rez, 169.

⁸⁴ Su3rez, 169.

but, when Rebecca finds a job in a factory, he gets angry with her as he feels that she undermines his role as a patriarch and he makes sure that she is promptly fired (56). Eventually, after being hit by Pasión, Rebecca returns to her parents' house with the children; Aurelia is shocked to discover that the children are secretly hoarding food because of their fear of hunger and decides to keep the children with her when Rebecca goes back to Pasión.

Pérez creates Iliana as a character who offers her the opportunity to challenge the arbitrariness of preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity as she has both 'male' and 'female' traits. Iliana's sisters and brothers, in fact, see her as an 'ugly' girl because she is 'masculine'; she is tall and has broad shoulders and narrow hips and, furthermore, refuses to follow the examples set by her family in terms of how she dresses. According to her sisters, Iliana wears baggy clothes, prefers to wear men's trousers, and refuses to take care of her hair, instead of tying it in a ponytail (276). Pérez throws a stark light on the contradictions inherent within the Dominican-American household, as Iliana's sisters accuse her of being masculine, while, at the same time, describing her gait as "whorish" (308). This internal tension reflects Pérez's own life: she has reported in interviews that she was referred to as masculine because she would not follow certain rules: "I should have straightened hair and curled or whatever. By virtue of my pulling my hair back, it presents a challenge. It's like a desexualizing of myself. [...] you know, people make certain judgments based on appearances."⁸⁵ Furthermore, it is not only Iliana's physical looks which come under scrutiny by Pérez: confidence, independence or defiance are also seen, within the family, as attributes unfitting for a woman:

What I was trying to explore, in Iliana's case anyway, was the issue of gender and how, in Latino culture, there are specific ways in which we should be feminine or be women. These roles are ascribed traits such as nurturing, caring, submissiveness, independence, defiance, and, for that matter, sexual aggression and hostility.⁸⁶

Feeling rejected or, at least, not fully accepted by her family, Iliana seeks the validation of Ed, who is also ostracised by society because of his sexual orientation. By combining Iliana and Ed as friends, Pérez sets them outside the accepted gender norms and further complicates the issue by contrasting the concepts of masculinity and femininity promoted from inside the family home to those formulated outside its walls: when Iliana asks Ed if she looks masculine, Ed insists that she is feminine and that her sisters' views are attributable solely to jealousy.

⁸⁵ Myriam J. A. Chancy, "The Heart of Home Loida Maritz Pérez in Dialogue," *MaComère* v. 5, (2002), 16.

⁸⁶ Chancy "in Dialogue", 13.

Pérez also explores the oppression of women within the Adventist church and how its strict rules further complicate relations within the family. The doctrine of the church which the family attends strengthens the idea that men are superior, while women are sinful and evil. When Iliana attends the Sabbath service with her family, the pastor starts the service with a sermon on the topic of the sanctity of marriage. Despite his stance, he finds a way to legitimatise adultery, despite preaching against it. Adultery, he suggests, results from the deceit of women, who change their looks to entrap men within marriage: when a man finds out, after marriage, that his wife is not as pretty as she made him believe, the pastor argues that he is not to be blamed if he cheats on her since the relationship was not built on truth in the first place. The pastor then uses the Biblical image of Eve to highlight the wickedness of women: “Ah! The vanity of women. It’s been so since the time of Eve. That is why so many marriages fail. How can they succeed when they have not been founded on honesty and truth?” (106). The pastor’s argument clearly increases the pressure on women such as Rebecca, Marina and Iliana, who are expected to look naturally pretty and will be found wanting if they fail to, but Iliana understands that the pastor, having cheated on his wife, is trying to justify himself. Iliana might be better placed to see through his hypocrisy because she is very different from the rest of the church attendees due to her life choices; in particular, we know that she decided not to look for a husband and not to go to a religious university. She is fully aware that, because of these choices, she is no longer welcome in the community of the church: “her friendship with [the other members of the church], predicated on shared beliefs, had begun to unravel when she announced her decision to attend a secular university” (121).

Iliana, however, is not the only outcast in the church: even though she has strong religious beliefs, Marina is also rejected. Before the end of the service, Marina has a seizure of spasms and claims that she has “seen God’s face” (109). The pastor, then, announces that Marina is possessed by the devil and orders that she should be thrown out the church. When Papito, also believing that his daughter is possessed, feels embarrassed and does not stand up for her, Marina, distraught, rushes out of the church, understanding that she is being rejected by a community, or a ‘home’, in which she had faith. Feeling confused about her beliefs, Marina cuts her wrist when she gets home, in a failed suicide attempt. Marina’s brush with death, however, makes her parents reconsider the meaning of ‘home’ for their children and their role within it.

After Marina’s attempt to commit suicide, Papito tries to convince Aurelia to go back to the Dominican Republic. Papito, in fact, thinks that Marina would have a chance of starting her own family there because many Dominican men will court her as she has American citizenship

and he naively assumes that his daughter would overcome her mental disorders if she were to create a family of her own: “once she married and had children, she’d have no choice but to keep her head on straight” (234). This is not the first time that the family have discussed the possibility of returning but Iliana and her siblings are rooted in the United States, and both Papito and Aurelia know that they will not accept going back: “their youngest [Tico], remembering little of their birthland, considered it a backward, poverty-ridden place” (21-2). Aurelia, moreover, makes it clear that she is not interested in returning to the Dominican Republic because she, as well, no longer sees it as her or her family’s ‘home’: “I know we’re tired.” Aurelia says, “me as much as you. That’s why I want to focus on how we’re going to live right here and now. This is home, Papito. We’ve worked hard for it, and I don’t have the energy to start over one more time” (235). Overall, the novel suggests that, unlike Papito who thinks he will find peace of mind and a proper ‘home’ only in the Dominican Republic, Aurelia shows greater wisdom, accepts her new life in the United States but refuses to equate any particular geographical place with serenity. In the United States, Aurelia has been constantly looking to create a place to call home, trying to beautify and progressively ‘Americanise’ the different family homes in order to create a welcoming environment for herself and her children. At the end of the novel, however, she fully realises that idealising one’s country of origin or the new country where they have settled would not solve the family’s fundamental problems and that something else is needed for all of them to feel at ‘home’:

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).

In order to achieve this frame of mind, Aurelia realises that she needs to revisit her past which has its roots in the Dominican Republic and that in order to help her children to accept themselves she cannot continue to deny her origins but has to reconnect with those parts of herself she has been trying to ignore and occlude for years. Tapping into an inner strength which she believes stems from her mother, Aurelia starts to rely again on the special powers she had inherited from her mother in order to protect her children and build a proper and safe home for all of them:

For too long she had relied on God to grant her peace, reluctant to believe that He, in His wisdom, had endowed the world and its creatures with the powers each needed to survive. It was these powers which she had spurned so many years before and which her soul had ached for with a constancy that prayers had not soothed (135).

Thanks to her special powers, Aurelia is teleported to Pasi3n's house where she finds him feeding the chicken which he keeps inside the household. Invisible to him, Aurelia begins to move the feathers around knowing that this will cause Pasi3n to have a lethal asthma attack. The death of Pasi3n frees her grandchildren from the threat he constituted and, even if it does not fully free Rebecca from her husband's ghost, it at least reduces him to a manageable spirit who can be conjured up by his wife in less disempowering terms. Rebecca, in fact, feels that, after his death, she can also use special powers to "love him with an intensity which she had failed to offer him in life" (305): this feeling provides Rebecca with safety and fulfilment and with a sense of 'home' that she had never been able to experience before.

Iliana too manages to develop a notion of 'home' which has less to do with place and more with a state of mind. As we have seen, Marina plays an important role in destabilising the meaning of home for Iliana. After Marina's (alleged) recovery from her attempted suicide, Iliana introduces her to Ed. Marina becomes more suspicious of her sister's gender when she sees how Iliana is interacting with Ed in a non-sexual way:

They interacted as boys would have and teased each other as Marina had seen her brothers tease among themselves. Iliana also addressed her friend with ease. Not once had she deferred to him as women were supposed to do with men, nor had she expended any energy flirting or attempting to look pretty for his sake (276).

Marina suspects that she has made a discovery concerning her sister's gender, and so she plans to find proof. She waits until the night falls and she is alone with Iliana in the basement they share. She then attacks Iliana and tries to get hold of what she imagines to be Iliana's penis. When Iliana screams, Tico comes to the room and drags Marina away from her sister. Marina expresses the frustration of being stopped by saying "'I almost had it!' Marina shrieked, yanking her hand out from between her sister's thighs. 'I almost had it in my hand!'" (284). When Marina calms down, Iliana thinks she can handle the situation and asks Tico to leave them alone but Marina

attacks Iliana again. This time, she rapes her sister with her fist, causing Iliana to bleed and scream when her parents come to the basement. At this point a confused, humiliated and lost Iliana refuses to denounce Marina and to reveal that she has lost her virginity by her sister's hand -distressingly, one could argue that she accepts domestic violence just as Rebecca did. Iliana's body violently reacts to her denial of reality – just as it did when she pretended earlier at the university that racism and violence did not exist- and she becomes physically sick. However, when she realised that university was not providing her with the home she was looking for, Iliana still had her home in Brooklyn to run back to but this time, she is stuck in the only place she calls home and which, for her, is both deeply alienating and also utterly unsafe. On the night of the rape, in fact, “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 following day, remembering that, according to her brothers, women who lost their virginity can be spotted from the way they walk, Iliana becomes self-conscious of her movement, trying not to reveal the truth to the people in the street (307). Roaming around New York, she re-evaluates the reasons behind her return to Brooklyn and realises that

she had returned not so much to help as to be embraced. She had wanted, more than anything, to belong. [...] she had made the decision to return and to re-establish a connection with her family so that, regardless of where she went thereafter, she would have comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her the courage (312).

When she reaches home after sunset, however, Iliana is attacked by her father who slaps her and calls her a “whore” for staying outside late (312). At that point, Iliana takes the decision to leave her home, reclaiming her body, and defying those who wish to control it:

No No. I will not fall or flinch. I will not let you or anyone else ever knock me down again. I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone. You will not make me be ashamed of it as my sister did. You will not make me recoil from it or renounce my life as I thought I would do. I will survive all this. I will walk out of this house erect (313; italics in the text)

By reclaiming her body violated, in different ways by her sister and father, Iliana decides to create her home within herself and to leave her family home for good when, feeling guilty about hurting Iliana, Papito apologises to her and explains that he just wanted to teach her a sense of fear in order to protect her. Iliana realises that her father, while taking an authoritative role in the house, is in fact “more afraid of the world than she herself had ever been” (320) and, while she insists on leaving home, she reaches the reconciliation which she was looking for, not with her family but with herself. Accepting responsibility for her life, she stops blaming her parents for any problems or difficulties she faces in her life and reclaims her independence: “any difficulties she encountered from then on would have to be hers to work out on her own” (320-1). While Iliana decides to go back to her studies, her decision is not taken in order to seek out another home because she has finally accepted that *home* is not a geographical place but a place in the mind:

Everything she had experienced; everything she continued to feel for those whose lives would be inextricably bound with hers; everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home (321).

Iliana’s home, therefore, will be with her all the time, regardless of where she will be: memories, hopes and desires, the past, the present, and the future all form part of this ‘home’ which Iliana has to build by moving forward without forgetting her past. In other words, Iliana locates home precisely in what Torres-Saillant calls “the *continuous negotiation* of traditions, practices, and beliefs inherited from the ancestral homeland and the transformative thoughts, values and ways emanating from the experience of living as an ethnic minority in the United States.”⁸⁷ Arguably, *Geographies of Home* presents us with a family of Dominican Americans with complex identities and harrowing experiences; at the same time, it denounces the limiting and damaging ways of identifying “home” with a one country at the exclusion of everything else which the other country can offer in terms of experience and suggests that it is fundamental instead to accept one’s ‘hybrid’ identity, celebrating both the richness that this can bring and the strength that it can transmit to the migrant in search for a ‘home’. Pérez seems to share Iliana’s conclusion about what ‘home’ means to her as a Dominican American: she considers words like

⁸⁷ Torres-Saillant, (2005), 110.

“identity, nationality, and home” to be “paradoxical,” and relative to each person’s beliefs and, like Iliana, she describes “home” as “an abstract, psychic space with which I render as ‘home’ any place I choose to inhabit.”⁸⁸

Up to this point, we have seen how, for the protagonists of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *¡Yo!* and *Geographies of Home*, the Dominican Republic often represents the only alternative to a stressful, deprived and often rather isolated life in the United States where they have no access to fellow Dominican migrants. In the following chapters, I will be examining how the existence and the particular location of Dominican-American communities facilitate but also further complicate the process of creating a ‘home’ for the migrants settling in the United States. I will begin by looking at the writing of Junót Díaz considering, amongst other things, the interaction between his characters and the community of Northern New Jersey where they live and function. In his fiction, echoing Alvarez’s and Pérez’s decisions, Díaz revisits and recreates the very places he grew up in in order to investigate the marginalisation of specific Dominican-American communities and of specific individuals within these communities.

⁸⁸ Discussion with Danticat et al., 75.

Chapter Three

“Reflections in a Mirror”:

Marginalisation and Junot Díaz’s *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)⁸⁹

In this chapter, I will analyse the experiences of first and second generation migrants within the context of the Dominican-American community of the Paterson area in Northern New Jersey as they are portrayed by Junot Díaz and his alter-ego Yunior, the narrator of his three books so far: the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and his two collections of short stories *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012).⁹⁰ Yunior, like Díaz, grows up in New Jersey in the late 1970s and the 1980s, a decade in which increasing numbers of Dominicans arrived in the United States and Dominican Americans became a substantial recognised minority. Díaz emphasises how, rather than providing support to its members, the Dominican-American community and its expectations can be instrumental to crash individuals who cannot or do not want to conform with traditional dominant discourses, further ostracising non-conformist members of a community who already feel marginalised because of their origin and location.

This is particularly evident in Díaz’s Pulitzer-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) where he recounts the interconnected lives of four utterly distinct Dominican American characters: Yunior, a misogynistic playboy, Lola, a rebellious young woman, Oscar, an American comic book nerd, and Beli, the matriarch, who represents the Old World of the Dominican Republic to her children. I argue that Díaz’s narrative choices reveal his intention to create a novel that not only addresses a Dominican-American experience but, more specifically, the experience of those who are sidelined within the community itself and feel doubly isolated, both by their fellow Dominican Americans and by American society, particularly white-American society, as a whole. Díaz, in fact, is very critical of “the literary apparatus” in the United States, where, he believes, the “white writer” is still seen as the “universal writer” despite the fact that, in reality, the population of the country is so very diverse.⁹¹ As a migrant writer,

⁸⁹ This title derives from a lecture given by Díaz in 2009 in New Jersey where he described his intention to write books to provide marginalised people in general and Dominican Americans in particular with a mirror or a reflection of themselves. NJ.Com. “Ledger Live: Author Junot Diaz’s New Jersey,” [Oct 22, 2009], video clip, YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3vm5v5bWYQ>>. (accessed 13 January 2014).

⁹⁰ Junot Díaz, *This is How You Lose Her* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2012).

⁹¹ Jacob Sugarman, “Junot Díaz: ‘Orson Scott Card is a Cretinous Fool,’” *Salon Magazine*, 17 September 2013 <http://www.salon.com/2013/09/17/junot_diaz_orson_scott_card_is_a_cretinous_fool/> (accessed 06 January 2014).

Díaz believes that the value of art lies in its ability to create a space for those disallowed by society to express their individuality and who are not represented by mainstream literature.

Díaz was born in 1969 to a poor family in the capital of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo. His father had worked as a low-ranking officer during the rule of Trujillo and the early years of his successor Balaguer and, once he migrated to the United States, he initially found work as a forklift operator.⁹² Díaz arrived in the United States in 1974 with his mother and four siblings to be reunited with his father: they lived together in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, for five years until the father abandoned his family once and for all. Consequently, his mother took several low-paid jobs, working as a maid, and in factories, in order to be able to raise her five children.⁹³ Díaz's is one of the many migrant families who left the Dominican Republic because of poverty, unemployment and low wages after President Balaguer (1966-1978) lifted passport restrictions, imposed earlier by Trujillo. By 1973, the number of Dominicans arriving in the United States had risen to 13,858 per year and large numbers of Dominicans settled in particular east coast areas where identifiable Dominican-American communities started to emerge.⁹⁴ These communities established themselves primarily in Washington Heights in Manhattan, New York, but also, to a lesser extent, in New Jersey and Miami.⁹⁵ According to Duany, the Dominicans "recreated their homeland in the diaspora": in their neighbourhoods, they spoke Dominican Spanish, they enjoyed the same celebrations they had back home, listened to the same music, and created businesses to reproduce products or types of food that only existed back in the Dominican Republic.⁹⁶

According to Levitt, scholars have long debated the socioeconomic background of those migrants from the Dominican Republic who arrived in the United States in the 1970s, "especially their regional and class composition."⁹⁷ For instance, Levitt refers to the research of Max Castro and Thomas Boswell which suggests that "although all classes were represented, emigrants came primarily from the working class."⁹⁸ Citing instead Antonio Ugalde, Frank D. Bean and Gilbert Cárdenas, Levitt refers to the 1974 DIAGNOS National Study which reports that almost seventy-five percent of the Dominicans in the United States had come from urban areas in the Dominican

⁹² Strauss.

⁹³ Jaggi.

⁹⁴ Alvarez. *Something to Declare*, 157.

⁹⁵ For more on this see Howard, 98 and Duany, 74.

⁹⁶ Duany, 174-5.

⁹⁷ Levitt, 401.

⁹⁸ Levitt, 402. Here Levitt refers to Max Castro and Thomas D. Boswell, "The Dominican Diaspora Revisited: Dominicans and Dominican-Americans in a New Century" *The North-South Agenda*, Paper 53. Miami: North-South Center, University of Miami.

Republic.⁹⁹ According to Duany, these urban areas align with a “relatively affluent social strata in the Dominican Republic as measured by their occupational status and educational attainment.”¹⁰⁰ However, Ugalde, Bean and Cárdenas also explain that, in any case, many of those who originally came from middle class backgrounds or had professional experience in the Dominican Republic, were forced to take “lower status jobs” in the United States.¹⁰¹ Using the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) records as an important source for their research, Ugalde, Bean and Cárdenas reveal that in 1975, the highest number (thirty-nine percent) of Dominican migrants occupied positions as craftsmen, operatives, and workers in the United States, while eighteen percent worked in the service sector and private household jobs.¹⁰² According to Rubén Rumbaut, in the 1980s, the financial conditions of Dominican migrants worsened and migrant Dominican families became the poorest among other diasporic groups from Asia, Africa, Canada, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. Thirty percent of Dominican families in the United States lived under the poverty line, eight percent more than those from the Mexican diaspora, ranked as the second poorest group.¹⁰³

Díaz writes precisely about the working-class migrant experience in New Jersey of that time, attributing traits to the narrator Yuniór that reflect the author’s own progression ‘from Paterson to the Pulitzer’.¹⁰⁴ In 1992, Díaz obtained his BA in English from Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey, going on to gain a Master’s Degree in Creative Writing from Cornell University in 1995. Díaz became an established Dominican American writer after the success of his first collection of short stories *Drown* (1996), published when he was twenty-seven years old. As a university student in the late 1980s, Díaz had to deliver pool tables and work in steel mills in order to support himself during his studies¹⁰⁵ and in his short story “Edison, New Jersey” (included in *Drown*) Yuniór too delivers pool tables to the rich suburbs. In 2012, when Díaz, by then an established and successful author and lecturer, began to write *This is How You Lose Her*, the back injuries he sustained in working his way through university were

⁹⁹ Levitt, 401. Here Levitt refers to Antonio Ugalde, Frank D. Bean and Gilbert Cárdenas, “International Migration Review,” *International Migration Review Special Issue: International Migration in Latin America* v. 13, no. 2 (summer 1979). Ugalde et al. explain that DIAGNOS is a national health survey conducted by Ministry of Health of the Dominican Republic in 1974 (238).

¹⁰⁰ Duany, 58.

¹⁰¹ Ugalde, Bean and Cárdenas, 243.

¹⁰² Ugalde, Bean and Cárdenas, 242.

¹⁰³ Rubén G. Rumbaut, “The Americans: Latin Americans and Caribbean Peoples in the United States” in *Americas: New Interpretive Essays*, ed. Alfred Stepan (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 292-3.

¹⁰⁴ Yuniór, the narrator Díaz uses for most of his stories across his three works, also arrives in New Jersey from the Dominican Republic in 1977. This is explored in *Drown*, when Yuniór says that he arrived “three years before” 1980. “Fiesta 1980” in *Drown*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ruby Cutolo, “Guns and Roses, Author Profile: Junot Díaz,” *Publishers Weekly*, 30 July 2012, 32.

beginning to develop into spinal stenosis.¹⁰⁶ In the closing story of that collection, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” we see that Yunior, also a lecturer and a writer, has developed the same spinal condition as the author, and for the same reason.¹⁰⁷ Díaz thus highlights the extent to which a working class background can continue to play a potentially crippling role even when one has been able to improve one’s financial status. Díaz currently works as an editor at the Boston Review and as a lecturer in Creative Writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology but, despite being part of the “Literary Establishment,” he is keen to remind his audiences that his past sets him apart from the usual members of the academic elite: in his Pulitzer winning speech, Díaz famously introduced himself as “just this Dominican kid from New Jersey.”¹⁰⁸

Díaz’s interest in the life of the marginalised has roots in his experience as a migrant but also in important cultural trends of the 1980s that would define the experience of his generation: at that time, as Díaz has put it, “you didn’t just have [...] the full combination of hip-hop and punk but also on the arts scene, on the performative scene [...], you had the anti-nuclear movement [...] Enormous amounts of stuff was happening.”¹⁰⁹ Díaz refers to punk and hip hop as important elements for the creation of his novel because, in a sense, both seek to address the idea of the ‘outsider’. For example, S. Craig Watkins defines hip hop as a form of art which defies mainstream ideologies through changing the image of the “poor, marginal, and untouchable” to produce something more “desirable.”¹¹⁰ Significantly, Díaz has identified Yunior’s voice (that is the voice of the main narrator in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*) with hip hop: “I’ve always thought Yunior’s voice isn’t possible without hip-hop.”¹¹¹ As James Bradshaw insists, moreover, the punk movement was also deeply engaged in foregrounding the experience of the disenfranchised and of those who “protested” against mainstream American society and its values.¹¹² Lola (a character who is allowed to narrate her own story in chapter two) can be seen as closely linked to the punk subculture, in that she describes herself in her teenage years as a product of the movement: “a punk chick. That’s what I became. A Siouxsie

¹⁰⁶ Boris Kachka, “Junot Díaz’s Counterlife,” *New York Magazine*, 19 August 2012.

<<http://nymag.com/guides/fallpreview/2012/junot-diaz-2012-8/#>> (accessed 26 September 2015).

¹⁰⁷ Junot Díaz, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” in *This is How You Lose Her* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2012), 209.

¹⁰⁸ Lindesay Irvine and agencies, “Junot Diaz wins Pulitzer First novel that took 11 years to write wins prestigious American award,” *The Guardian*, 8 April 2008

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/08/news.pulitzerprize>> (accessed 30 January 2014).

¹⁰⁹ Smithsonian Latino Center. “Junot Diaz: In His Own Words,” [29 November 2010], video clip, YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38sfeHNgxOw>> (accessed 13 January 2014).

¹¹⁰ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a movement* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2005), 70-1.

¹¹¹ Sugarman.

¹¹² James Bradshaw, ed., *Punk: A Directory of Modern Subversive Culture* (USA: Hollow Contemporary Art, 2007), 66.

and Banshees-loving punk chick” (54). It is no coincidence that, in the illustration which accompanied “Wild Wood”—a short story version of part of chapter two of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* featured in *The New Yorker* in 2015—the artist Jaime Hernández illustrates Lola as a mohawked punk.¹¹³ Alternative comics, such as those of the Mexican-American Los Bros Hernández’s *Love & Rockets* series, in fact, are considered integral to Díaz’s characterisations of the protagonists of this novel. Oscar is described as looking “like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernández’s *Palomar*” (29), while Díaz explained that Lola is “an extension of Hopey and Maggie’s world”, referring to the alternative/punk bisexual Latino characters of the Hernándezs’ comics.¹¹⁴

As anticipated, Yuniór shares with “this Dominican kid from New Jersey” a number of traits and life experiences. *Drown*, for example, reveals to us that Yuniór’s father, Ramón de las Casas, used to work in the army during Trujillo’s presidency; with the worsening economic conditions of the Dominican Republic during the 1970s, Ramón decides to migrate to the United States, leaving his family behind. *Drown* depicts New York as it was conceived in the imaginary of some Dominicans: like Rebecca in *Geographies of Home*, Ramón imagines New York as a city full of riches and “gold coins, like the ones that had been salvaged from the many wrecks about our Island, stacked high as sugarcane.”¹¹⁵ The reality of Ramón’s living conditions in the United States, as depicted in the story “Negocios”, however, is far from idyllic: while he struggles to hold down two jobs, working twenty hours a day, he is only able to pay his own rent, living in a small shared house with three other tenants. When he meets Nilda, a Dominican with an American passport, Ramón convinces her to marry him so that he can stay in the United States, and live in her house. While in *Geographies of Home* there was no interaction between the migrants and the mother country, here the strength of social connections between the diasporic community and the Dominican Republic is testified by the fact that Nilda and Virta (Yuniór’s mother who still lives on the island) soon find out about each other:

¹¹³ Junot Díaz, “Wildwood Teen-age Dominican Runaway,” *The New Yorker*, 11 June 2007. <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/06/11/wildwood>> (accessed 25 September 2015).

¹¹⁴ Michael Cavanaugh, “Best Books of 2013: Junot Díaz & Jaime Hernandez team up deftly on deluxe illustrated ‘This is How You Lose Her,’” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2013 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/best-books-of-2013-junot-diaz-and-jaime-hernandez-team-up-deftly-on-deluxe-illustrated-this-is-how-you-lose-her/2013/10/24/b374ffa2-3cd7-11e3-a94f-b58017bfee6c_blog.html> (accessed 21 September 2015).

¹¹⁵ Junot Díaz, “Negocios,” in *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 130.

Nilda learned about Papi's other familia from a chain of friends that reached back across the Caribe. It was inevitable [...] Mami reached back across a similar chain of immigrants to locate Papi in the North.¹¹⁶

Here and elsewhere *Drown* underlines how, despite the geographical distance, the migrants' experiences in the United States and the lives of their relatives in the Dominican Republic are strictly interconnected on a material and psychological levels.

Overall, the 'bigamous' Ramon is portrayed as an irresponsible husband and father. Even after securing a "union job with Reynolds Aluminium in West New York that paid triple what he was making at the radiator shop,"¹¹⁷ Ramón is unwilling to support Nilda and their child and when he experiences discrimination and racism on the factory floor and sustains an injury which results in his demotion to beginner-level jobs with rotating shifts, Ramón feels that he needs the support of his original family and, as soon as he finds a new job as a building superintendent in Perth Amboy, he brings them over from the Dominican Republic to live with him. Before then, since he did not support his Dominican family financially as they had hoped he would, they had to live in extreme poverty: "the only way we could have been poorer was to have lived in the campo or to have been Haitian migrants, and Mami regularly offered these to us as brutal consolation."¹¹⁸ At school, Yunior and his older brother Rafa (just nine and twelve years old at the time) have to share other pupils' books because they cannot afford their own and Yunior's mother is forced to send the children to two different sets of relatives during the summers so that she can work at a chocolate factory in Santo Domingo. Díaz vividly illustrates the degree to which the boys are disappointed in their father with the story of Ysrael - a child whose face had been eaten by a pig when he was a baby, and who now wears a mask to cover his deformity. When Rafa and Yunior travel to meet Ysrael and see the face beneath the mask, Yunior and Rafa become jealous of the outfit and kite that Ysrael's father has sent him from the United States since Ramón only sent them "letters and an occasional shirt or pair of jeans at Christmas."¹¹⁹ Rafa's dismissing of Ysrael's father's promise to take his son to the United States for treatment is clearly a coping mechanism designed to deal with the fact that he fears that he and his brother will have to remain in poverty in the Dominican Republic:

Those doctors will kill you faster than the guardia.

¹¹⁶ Díaz, "Negocios", 146.

¹¹⁷ Díaz, "Negocios", 151- 2.

¹¹⁸ Junot Díaz, "Aguantando," in *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 54.

¹¹⁹ Junot Díaz, "Ysrael" in *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 12.

These are American doctors.

Rafa sniggered. You're lying.

I saw them last spring. They want me to go next year.

They're lying to you. They probably just felt sorry.¹²⁰

Rafa only manages to overcome his envy for Ysrael's relationship with his father and his connection to the United States, when he sees the boy's deformity which leads him to feel a sense of superiority. However, unlike Yunior, who wants to believe that Ysrael could have another chance, Rafa convinces himself that the doctors cannot do anything to help Ysrael: "Yunior, he said tiredly. They aren't going to do shit to him."¹²¹ The story of Ysrael, can be seen as set a direct reflection on Díaz's experience of being in the Dominican Republic while his father was away in the United States, apparently earning money, but failing to send any of it home. While Ysrael appears to be a fictional character, Rafa seems inspired by Díaz's real-life brother given that both the fictional and the real sibling suffer from cancer.¹²²

"Fiesta 1980" introduces the reader to community and extended family life in the United States when Yunior's family is invited to a party at the home of his aunt who has recently arrived in the United States: it is evident here how Dominican traditions are replicated in the host country as Dominican food is served, everyone speaks Spanish, adults perform Dominican dances and the Dominican patriarchal privilege is uncritically redeployed. The short story, in fact, depicts Ramón as a mini-Trujillo, a dictator in his own household who is proud of his own sexual adventures: everyone in the family knows that Ramón is conducting affairs and he does not care if his wife knows of them to the extent that he even takes his two sons to his mistress's house. Once a soldier in Trujillo's army, Ramón also treats his children as if they were new recruits, using both violence and intimidation to ensure that they follow his rules: "Papi was old-fashioned," Yunior writes, "he expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whapped. You couldn't look him in the eye either – that wasn't allowed."¹²³ Díaz's short story "Invierno" provides further examples of Ramón's obsession with discipline: when they first arrive in the United States, Rafa and Yunior find themselves in a new home, ruled by a mostly unfamiliar father: "when we heard our father's van arriving in the parking lot, Mami called us over for a quick inspection. Hair, teeth, hands, feet. If anything was wrong she'd hide

¹²⁰ Díaz, "Ysrael", 13.

¹²¹ Díaz, "Ysrael", 15.

¹²² The death of the fictional brother is narrated in the short story "The Pura Principle" from the author's most recent collection *This is How You Lose Her*, 150.

¹²³ Díaz, "Fiesta 1980", 19.

us in the bathroom until it was fixed.”¹²⁴ The father’s toughness inspires Yuniór to title a school essay “My Father the Torturer”, which, however, is taken as a joke by the teacher.¹²⁵

The relationship between Yuniór and his father is also briefly touched upon in “Aurora”, another short story from *Drown*, where the teenage Yuniór is violent towards one of his girlfriends,¹²⁶ possibly trying to imitate his father, his only model of masculinity and where we can see how Yuniór also replicates his father’s habit of sleeping with many women and mistreating them. In one of his interviews, Díaz explains that his and his friends’ concept of masculinity was very similar to the fictional Yuniór’s, because of the culture that surrounded them at home and in their immediate community:

The entire culture leads us towards dehumanising women in our imaginations. I and my male friends could not have been as fucked-up in our relationships, or done the things we did in our relationships, if we felt that women were truly human.¹²⁷

In his fictional work, Díaz shows how Yuniór starts to reflect upon and to question these cultural principles of masculinity when he begins to truly engage with women both intellectually and emotionally, a topic which is explored in depth in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In “Drown”, a short story from the collection that has the same name, Díaz also highlights how the dominant conceptualisation of masculinity also excludes men whose sexuality does not comply with the heterosexual majority.¹²⁸ In high school, Yuniór finds out that his best friend Beto is homosexual: when Beto exhibits his attraction to Yuniór, the second feels unsure but does not stop Beto from approaching him sexually. In the evening, however, Yuniór locks himself in his room, “terrified that [he] would end up abnormal, a fucking pato [gay],” and instead of dealing with his own conflicted feelings, Yuniór decides to cut off Beto once and for all.¹²⁹

The same short story also describes a faulty educational system which does not work against prejudice and discrimination and discourages non-white students from entering higher education, a point also made by Pérez and Cruz:

¹²⁴ Díaz, “Invierno,” in *This is How You Lose Her* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2012), 139.

¹²⁵ Díaz, “Fiesta 1980”, 23.

¹²⁶ “I punched her chest black and blue”, Yuniór confesses -see Junot Díaz, “Aurora,” in *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 42.

¹²⁷ Nicholas Wroe, “Junot Díaz: A Life in Books,” *The Guardian*, 31 August 2012.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/31/life-in-books-junot-diaz>> (accessed 26 September 2015).

¹²⁸ Junot Díaz, “Drown,” in *Drown*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

¹²⁹ Díaz, “Drown”, 82.

One teacher, whose family had two grammar schools named after it, compared us to the shuttles. A few of you are going to make it. Those are the orbiters. But the majority of you are just going to burn out. Going nowhere. He dropped his hand onto his desk. I could already see myself losing altitude, fading, the earth spread out beneath me, hard and bright.¹³⁰

Díaz explores the effect that this kind of discouragement can have on young people, driving students-of-colour out of the education system towards illegal ventures such as drug dealing, a commonly acknowledged symptom of a wider social malaise in the New Jersey of the 1980s, particularly in “Aurora” where Yunior thus describes the extent of drug dealing and usage among his teenage friends: “I have friends in Perth Amboy and New Brunswick who tell me they deal to whole families, from the grandparents down to the fourth graders.”¹³¹

The experiences of deprivation, discrimination and marginalisation depicted in *Drown* resonate but are conjugated in different ways in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* where Yunior returns as the main narrator and where we never hear the voice of the main protagonist, Oscar, a fact that, indirectly, conveys his isolation. The novel follows, in a non-chronological order, the lives of different members of the de León family in the Dominican Republic, mainly Bani and Santo Domingo, and in Paterson, New Jersey. The Dominican relatives include Abelard, his wife and his two daughters who die during Trujillo’s dictatorship and La Inca, a cousin of Abelard who adopts his youngest daughter Beli after the death of her parents and siblings. The Dominican American side of the family is comprised of Beli, who arrives in the United States at a young age, and the two children she has in New Jersey, Lola and Oscar: significantly, their father has abandoned them and, as a result, he is never present. Lola, the narrator of the second chapter, is a rebellious figure who attempts to escape from her mother during her teenage years while her brother Oscar is depicted as a sensitive, depressed, and overweight young man who studies at Rutgers University in the years between 1988 and 1992. There, for a period of time, he shares a room with Lola’s former boyfriend Yunior, who, as anticipated, narrates most of the novel and informs the reader’s perception of the characters’ estrangement from their world and the way in which they are perceived and criticised.

The novel begins with Yunior explaining that he believes that the de Léons’ misfortune traces back to an indigenous curse called *fukú*. The history of *fukú* is outlined in the first seven

¹³⁰ Díaz, “Drown”, 83- 4.

¹³¹ Díaz, “Aurora”, 40.

pages of the novel where Yuniór informs us that *Fukú americanus* (1) began with the arrival of colonial Europeans on Hispaniola, and is carried to the present, through many manifestations, one of which is the dictatorship of Trujillo. Yuniór later tells us how *fukú* strikes the de León family in 1944, when, in the Dominican Republic, Abelard Luis Cabral, a famous doctor and a loving father of two daughters, has to confront Trujillo's lust for his sixteen-year-old daughter Jacquelyn. While Abelard succeeds in hiding his daughter, he is denounced by close friends and does not escape Trujillo's rage. Tortured and sentenced to jail for life, Abelard cannot witness the birth of his third and last daughter, Beli. When his two older daughters and his wife die in mysterious circumstances, Beli, the only survivor of the family, is practically enslaved by some distant relatives until La Inca, a cousin of her dead father, saves her. *Fukú*, however, follows Beli on her journey to the United States, where she seeks a safer life after harrowingly escaping death due to her romantic involvement with a violent man who, unbeknownst to her, is in fact the husband of one of Trujillo's sisters. Oscar inherits the curse, which, in his case, manifests itself in his inability to find love. Oscar, in fact, is isolated from his community and his peers due to his passion for science-fiction, fantasy, and comic books and for the fact that he remains a virgin throughout his college years: as his friend Yuniór confirms, ventriloquising a traditional version of Dominican masculinity, Oscar's status is unique as "it's against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once" (174). The existence of the curse might be seen as further confirmed when Oscar's only love results in his death. In a summer trip to the Dominican Republic, following his graduation from Rutgers, Oscar falls in love with a prostitute called Ybón and her pimp/boyfriend, an officer in the Dominican police force, puts in action his threats to murder Oscar: at the age of twenty-four, we are told, Oscar is shot dead by Dominican policemen working for Ybón's man. We will see, however, how the ending of the novel also indicates that Oscar might have put in place a counterspell which might lead to the end of his family's *fukú*.

Oscar's death, however, further demonstrates his alienation from the United States despite the fact that he owns an American passport. When Ybón's ex-boyfriend threatens to kill him, Oscar seeks the help of the US embassy in the Dominican Republic but the embassy does not take any action to protect him. While, in Alvarez's novel, Carlos who is a member of the Dominican elite is actually helped by the embassy to escape Trujillo's Dominican Republic, due to Oscar's social marginal position both in the United States and the Dominican Republic, his plight does not spark any interest: he is clearly 'expendable' and effectively condemned to death. Moreover, after Oscar's death, "no charges were ever filed" against any suspect and neither the

embassy of the United States in the Dominican Republic or the local police are interested in a proper murder investigation (323).

Díaz does not only place the financially underprivileged Dominican Americans at the centre of his novel but he also refers to the way in which they relate, perceive and are perceived by other ‘outsiders’. The novel, in fact, explores some of the interactions between Dominican Americans and other ethnic groups in New Jersey in the 1970s and 1980s. While the overall migration of Dominicans increased during these two decades, the number of Dominicans in New Jersey was consistently small in relative terms compared to other ethnic groups in the state. The relationship between Dominican Americans and the white Americans of New Jersey is explored through Lola’s entanglement with a white young man. At sixteen, Lola escapes from her family home with “un blanquito,” the nineteen-year-old Aldo, who lives with his father at Jersey Shore, Wildwood (61). As we will see, Lola leaves her home as she wishes to experience life outside of Paterson where, she assumes, she will not be hampered by the same gender restrictions which, in the Dominican-American community, seriously limit her choices: as she herself puts it, she wanted “the life that existed beyond Paterson, beyond [her] family, beyond Spanish” (55). Ironically, after Lola moves to live with Aldo, she is disappointed by her encounter with the working class white community. She finds herself stuck with her boyfriend and his controlling father, an embittered World War II veteran. We learn that he spent most of his life on a military base and he treated Lola badly. The novel suggests that, in New Jersey, the working class whites do not seem to live in better conditions than those of the Latinos: Aldo and his father, in fact, live in one of the “cheapest little bungalows” and work in a small garage. Aldo’s name suggests that he might have Italian origins and, therefore, that he might also be a member of a minority and of a migrant family. They however still perceive Lola as having a lower social position because of her darker skin-colour (65). For instance, near the end of their relationship, Aldo racially abuses her with a joke that plays on poverty; in Lola’s words: “Aldo says: Do you know what Pontiac stands for? Poor Old Nigger Thinks It’s A Cadillac. But who was he looking at when he told his punch line? He was looking straight at me” (66-7). Aldo’s and his father’s treatment of Lola suggests their belief in a social hierarchy where whiteness still plays a crucial role. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez depicted discriminatory attitudes amongst Latinos while Díaz here offers an example of racism among minorities in New Jersey which further stratifies (and divides) the working classes.

The attitude of Aldo and his father might also be explained by the fact that, during the 1980s and 1990s, people of colour slowly became more numerous in Northern New Jersey while

the non-Hispanic white population sensibly decreased.¹³² The increase in the number of Latinos in the New Jersey area is also highlighted in the short story “Invierno”, in the collection *This is How You Lose Her*: when Yuniór first moves to Perth Amboy, he meets a white-American brother and sister, Elaine and Eric, around his age. Their first encounter is somewhat confusing as Yuniór is unable to understand their language but Yuniór informs us that: “in less than a year [Elaine and Eric] would be gone. All the white people would be. All that would be left would be us colored folks.”¹³³ When Latinos begin to arrive, moreover, we are told that they were of mixed origins: “that morning alone we’d seen three moving trucks from our patio door. I’m going to pray for Dominicans, [Yuniór’s mother] had said, her face against the glass, but what we would end up getting were Puerto Ricans.”¹³⁴ When, in the early 1990s Oscar returns to his old school as a substitute teacher, he witnesses the change in the racial demographics and patterns of prevarication since he was a pupil: “in the old days it had been the white kids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was kids of color who performed the necessities” (264). Oscar’s observation, however, not only indicates the changing nature of New Jersey and its evolution into a multi-racial community, but is also used to point out that the abuse once levied by white bullies’ now comes from within the non-white community, which shares the same mentality as their former white-American tormenters. For this reason, Yuniór insists that while the number of students of colour has gone up, “some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change” (264).

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao also depicts the tension resulting from Dominicans being perceived as “African Americans” by the white mainstream culture of the United States. Torres-Saillant has pointed out that, once in the United States, many Dominican Americans found themselves compelled to “choose” between the white or black racial categories, because they were denied recognition within the United States in their own right¹³⁵ and Michael Boyden has argued that most second generation Dominican Americans define themselves as African Americans because they are often “categorized” as such by the wider American society on the basis of their skin colour.¹³⁶ Earlier in the first chapter of my thesis, I examined how the García girls, in the early 1960s, considered themselves ‘mistreated whites’,

¹³² NJSDC 2000 Census Publication, *Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin New Jersey, Counties and Selected Municipalities: 1980, 1990 and 2000*. (New Jersey: Division of Labor Market and Demographic Research New Jersey State Data Center, 2001): 29, 41.

¹³³ Díaz. “Invierno”, 138.

¹³⁴ Díaz. “Invierno”, 135.

¹³⁵ Silvio Torres-Saillant, “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity,” *Callaloo* v. 23, no.3 (summer 2000), 1108.

¹³⁶ Michael Boyden, “Translating the Watcher’s Voice: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* into Spanish,” *Meta* v.56, no. 1 (2011), 25. Boyden has based his conclusions on a study conducted by (Bailey 2000).

mistakenly seen as ‘blacks’. In *Geographies of Home*, we explored how Marina saw herself as belonging to the ‘Hispanic race’ while Iliana accepted the fact that her dark-skin linked her to an African ancestry, adopting what Duany calls an “Afro-Dominican identity.”¹³⁷ In Díaz’s novel, Lola shares some characteristics with African Americans as she is described as a very dark-skinned Latina (Yunior portrays her as “darker than your darkest grandma” (168)) but she has Caucasian features. For example, Yunior explains that Lola has “[Beli’s] green eyes (clearer, though) and [...] straight hair which makes [her] look more Hindu than Dominican” (52); in another sentence, he describes her “thin nose” (15). What distinguishes her from ‘conventional’ African Americans, however, is her use of Spanish. Boyden notes, in fact, that Díaz’s characters challenge the identification with African Americans and transcend the “binary black-white classification” by speaking Spanish.¹³⁸ He demonstrates this by citing an exchange in which Lola responds to Yunior’s “African-American English” with a Spanish phrase to disassociate herself from stereotypical depictions of African-American women: “even those nights after I got jumped she wouldn’t let me steal on her ass for nothing. So you can sleep in my bed but you can’t sleep with me? Yo soy prieta, Yuni, she said, pero no soy bruta” (169). Lola here makes it clear that she is dark-skinned (“Yo soy prieta”) but not ‘bruta’ (‘gross’) while her very use of Spanish sets her apart from African Americans.

Díaz’s second-generation migrant characters, however, do not resort primarily to Spanish but to a hybrid language or, as “a sort of streetwise brand of Spanglish”¹³⁹ while elite Dominican migrants like the García girls tended to keep Spanish and English separate. As Alvarez points out, they moved from a monolingual Spanish community in the Dominican Republic to a monolingual English-speaking community in the United States.¹⁴⁰ In her novels, as we have seen, Alvarez addresses the difficulty of being a Spanish speaker in a monolingual – English- community where even those who can speak Spanish (such as the Puerto Rican building superintendent Alfredo) communicate with other Spanish speakers in English. As a result, during her visit to the Dominican Republic after a long time in which she had been absent from the island, the adult Yolanda is confused when she speaks Spanish with her extended family and does not understand some of the words they use. Moreover, she thinks of her visit to the Dominican Republic as a chance to practice her Spanish, which she has partially forgotten.

¹³⁷ Duany, 76.

¹³⁸ Boyden, 24-5.

¹³⁹ Michiko Kakutani, “Travails of an Outcast,” *The New York Times*, 4 September 2007.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/books/04diaz.html?_r=0> (accessed 06 January 2014).

¹⁴⁰ Alvarez, *Something to declare*, 26.

Spanish, instead, is used widely in the community of Paterson, but the New Jersey of Díaz's youth described in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is very different from the New York neighbourhood of Washington Heights where the author moved later in his life and which has been inhabited by the largest number of Dominican migrants in the United States since the 1970s. In *Drown*, with the short story "Edison, New Jersey" Díaz highlights the differences between these two realities where Yunior describes the 'Dominicanness' of this latter neighbourhood in these terms: "Everything in Washington Heights is Dominican. You can't go a block without passing a Quisqueya Bakery or a Quisqueya Supermercado or a Hotel Quisqueya [...] Everybody's on the streets and the merengue's falling out of windows like TVs."¹⁴¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the earlier studies on the Dominican diaspora in the United States and the novels under scrutiny in the following chapters, namely, *Soledad* (2001) and *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005) by Angie Cruz (both published before *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*) are focused on Washington Heights. According to Duany, in fact, "Washington Heights, is so closely associated with the Dominican diaspora that scholars tend to focus on this area as a microcosm of the immigrants' experience."¹⁴² Less attention, instead, has been paid to New Jersey which shares the northern borders with, and is easily accessed from, New York. New Jerseyans, are traditionally referred to as the "bridge and tunnel crowd" because they come to Manhattan for shopping or entertainment crossing tunnels or bridges over and under the Hudson River.¹⁴³ Northern New Jersey and New York City have been connected by many highways since the 1950s, transport links that have facilitated the commuting of city workers and the relocation of businesses to the cheaper area of New Jersey for which New-Jerseyans have often provided manual labour.¹⁴⁴ New Jersey, however, has historically felt neglected because, as Dennis E. Gale argues, the "attention of government and civil affairs is generally centered on New York City," while "the suburban towns and state capitals of New Jersey and Connecticut generally receive a lower priority."¹⁴⁵ The Dominicans of New Jersey – Díaz's chosen subject – are therefore doubly marginalised: firstly, because they are a minority within the State of New Jersey and secondly, because the state itself is neglected.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, life in Paterson is explored from the point of view of different generations as the novel presents us with the young Oscar, Lola and Yunior but

¹⁴¹ Junot Díaz, "Edison, New Jersey," in *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 107.

¹⁴² Duany, 67.

¹⁴³ Many references to New Jersey as "bridge and tunnel crowd" are in movies such as *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Greenberg* (2010) and many others.

¹⁴⁴ Dennis E. Gale, *Greater New Jersey: Living in the Shadow of Gotham* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 24.

¹⁴⁵ Gale, 35.

also with Oscar's mother, Beli who meets the future father of her two children, Lola and Oscar, whilst on the plane to the United States in 1962. The United States provides Beli with the safety she seeks from the vengeful wife of her lover who is also Trujillo's sister and who has previously attempted to kill Beli, but, unlike Carlos in Alvarez's novel, Beli is not equipped with the education required to obtain a good job and is obliged by her circumstances to take on manual work in order to support herself. The diasporic experience as defined by her living and working conditions in New Jersey is unsatisfactory for Beli, who is unable to look forward to a career, and must instead endure misery and loneliness, especially when her husband abandons her after three years of marriage, leaving her to raise their children alone. Yuniors describes Beli's life in these terms: "the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora"(164); her job on the assembly line, in fact, is not only exhausting but exacerbates her sense of exclusion and loneliness since, due to anti-social shifts, she cannot enjoy a normal social life.

Beli's heavy work commitments cause a friction between herself and her children, especially Lola. In the second chapter of the novel, Lola, as an adult narrator, introduces her mother as a ruthless and angry woman, describing the way she used to treat her and her brother as they were growing up. Unlike the nuclear families of Yolanda and Iliana, in which mothers are responsible for the house affairs and fathers go outside to work, Beli has to leave her two children alone at home to take care of themselves, handing over to her eight-year-old daughter who also has to take care of her younger brother Oscar as well as do the housework and other duties. Lola says: "you could call her an absentee parent: if she wasn't at work she was sleeping, and when she was around it seemed all she did was scream and hit" (54). Lola describes Beli's strictness towards her, a strictness that explains Lola's inability to feel close to her mother and remembers: "she didn't bother talking to me unless it was to make death threats. When you grow up you'll meet me in a dark alley when you least expect it and then I'll kill you and nobody will know I did it!" (61) Lola's narration seems unforgiving towards her mother as it fails to acknowledge the fact that Beli could only ever be an "absentee mother," given that she at one point has to hold down three separate jobs in order to support her children.

After almost twenty years of work, moreover, it becomes clear that Beli's life is not getting any easier as she lives in the same poor house in the neighbourhood of Paterson, with no luxuries to speak of. When Beli develops cancer we are told that this formerly stunningly beautiful and independent woman loses her hair after chemotherapy and her breast to surgery, a surgery which also compromises the full usage of one arm and impairs her ability to work.

Despite this, since she cannot support herself without working at the factory, she has to work until she dies. Most importantly, the novel also implies that the industrial environment of New Jersey might be the cause of Beli's cancer, a fact that only emphasises the stark nature of the world in which she has to live. In fact, Díaz often describes the degradation of the landscape of Northern New Jersey which was used as a dump for industrial waste from New York factories, many of which eventually relocated to New Jersey after the 1950s.¹⁴⁶ In *This is How You Lose Her*, in the short story "Invierno," Yunior thus describes New Jersey from the point of view of a newly arrived migrant:

Each day the trucks would roll into our neighbourhood with the garbage. The landfill stood two miles out, but the mechanics of the winter air conducted its sound and odors to us undiluted. When we opened a window we could hear and smell the bulldozers spreading the garbage out in thick, putrid layers across the top of the landfill.¹⁴⁷

The burning of garbage described a few pages later conjures up an almost post-apocalyptic vision as those who lived in the area "looked out over the landfill, a misshapen, shadowy mound [...] abutted the Raritan. Rubbish fires burned all over it like sores and dump trucks and bulldozers slept quietly and reverently at its base."¹⁴⁸ This dystopian wasteland reminds us that many of those who lived in New Jersey during the Cold War in the second half of the twentieth century, also shared a sense of existential paranoia and felt deeply insecure as New Jersey's strategic seaside location meant that it played an important role in the defence against any expected nuclear attack on New York from the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁹

The Cold War, in fact, had a major impact on Díaz: popular culture, at the time, was imbued of catastrophic images and he grew up watching apocalyptic movies, reading *Planet of the Apes*, or looking at graphic novels such as *Watchmen*. It is not surprising that in the short story "Miss Lora" (in *This is How You Lose Her*), Yunior has dreams about nuclear attacks while the younger generation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, namely Lola, Yunior, and, in

¹⁴⁶ Gale, 32-3.

¹⁴⁷ Díaz. "Invierno", 134.

¹⁴⁸ Díaz. "Invierno", 145.

¹⁴⁹ Donald E. Bender reports that during the Cold War, New Jersey was the location of "surface to air missile sites, and command and control facilities were constructed in order to defend against the threat of attack by long range nuclear-armed aircraft of the Soviet Air Force." Donald E. Bender, Nike Missile Sites in New Jersey in Alpha System at Fairleigh Dickinson University <<http://alpha.fdu.edu/~bender/NYmsg.html>> (accessed 09 December 2013).

particular, Oscar, are also affected deeply by the idea that the world might destroy itself in a nuclear war. In the first chapter of the novel, Oscar is described as a:

sensitive eleven-year-old, watching the news at night outline where the atomic blasts would hit- and seeing his town in New Jersey in the black-it's no surprise that with every movie, every TV show, *everything* touching on the apocalypse, it started to eat at him.¹⁵⁰

Oscar, however, escapes fear and paranoia by leaping into the world of fantasy and comic books which also enables him to come to terms with the dislocating and disorienting experience of migration. Likewise, in an interview, Díaz explains how science-fiction, fantasy, and comic books helped him make sense of the most significant change in his life, namely his migration to the United States:

How in the world to describe the extreme experience of being an immigrant in the United States, the extreme experience of coming from the Third World and suddenly appearing in New Jersey [...] But science fiction, fantasy, and comic books are *meant* to do this kind of stupid stuff, they're meant to talk about these extreme ludicrous transformations.¹⁵¹

Importantly, Oscar does not only read the 'genres': he also writes his own stories about the end of the world where he depicts himself as a hero who saves the girls he likes, creating scenarios in which his nerdiness would actually be attractive, rather than a stigma.

The world of fantasy and comic books provides Oscar with an alternative reality which also helps him to cope with life in New Jersey but isolates him from his Dominican American peers because they associate his interest in the American popular culture with white-Americans. However, just because he is cast out of one community, it does not mean he is considered to be part of another. Thus, Stacey Balkan concludes that "within the logic of Diaspora Oscar cannot

¹⁵⁰ Anna Barnet, "Words on a Page: An Interview with Junot Díaz," *The Harvard Advocate*, <<http://theharvardadvocate.com/article/66/words-on-a-page-an-interview-with-junot-diaz/>> (accessed 09 June 2015).

¹⁵¹ Armando Celayo and David Shook, "In Darkness We Meet: A conversation with Junot Díaz," *World Literature Today* v.82, no. 2 (Mar/Apr 2008), 15.

rationally exist, for he belongs to neither the *Dominicanos* nor the *Blancos*; [whites].”¹⁵² Oscar is clearly set apart from Dominican Americans and other inhabitants of his ‘ghetto’: “you really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary United States ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (22). Díaz here criticises the way in which some people-of-colour appear contemptuous of education, and solely associate it with the dominant culture of white-Americans. Díaz himself experienced this form of misguided hostility and discrimination (“if you loved to read, people would think you were soft and trying to act white”¹⁵³) and in interviews Díaz has also explained how he himself was made fun of for going to the library to read, revealing that, if it had not been for his older brother and sister, he would have been beaten on many occasions.¹⁵⁴ The protection he was given by his family members in real life is not provided for his fictional character Oscar who is portrayed as a vulnerable outsider mocked and rejected by everyone. Significantly, Oscar’s marginalisation and in-betweenness are also highlighted by the fact that he uses a language which is a mixture of Spanish and English (“Spanglish”) but also, as Boyden observes, “nerd talk”.¹⁵⁵ Oscar, however, is also rejected from his fellow ‘geeks’ as his friends at high school, Miggs and Al, who share Oscar’s love for the genre, begin to exclude him when they start dating girls. Oscar comes to the conclusion that “his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by *him*” (29). Oscar’s extreme marginalisation is encapsulated by the scene from which Díaz has drawn his title. At Rutgers, Oscar “dresses up as Doctor Who” at Halloween and Yuniór recounts: “I couldn’t believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (180). Despite the fact that Yuniór knows very well who Doctor Who is, he seems to be deliberately ignoring the science-fiction context of Oscar’s costume because he does not want to be associated with the ridiculed sub-culture of the ‘geeks’. One of Yuniór’s friends, not knowing who Wilde is (a fact that demonstrates the lack of literary interest exhibited by some Dominican-American youth), mistakes “Wilde” for “Wao” and, after that, all of Yuniór’s friends call him by that name. Yuniór’s choice of Oscar Wilde, moreover, clearly encapsulates Oscar’s outsider status, since Wilde was homosexual, white and not Dominican. Oscar’s alleged similarity to Wilde, also reflects perceptions of Oscar’s masculinity within the Dominican-American

¹⁵² Stacey Balkan, “‘City of Clowns’: The City as a Performative Space in the Prose of Daniel Alarcón, Junot Díaz, and Roberto Bolano,” in *Wretched Refuge: Immigrants and Itinerants in the Postmodern*, ed. Jessica Datema and Diane Krumrey (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 100.

¹⁵³ Adriana Lopez, “Nerd Smith Adrian Lopez interviews Junot Díaz,” *Guernica, a magazine of Art & Politics*, (July 2009) <<http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/nerdsmith/>> (accessed 06 January 2014).

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Lopez.

¹⁵⁵ Boyden, 24.

community of New Jersey, a topic I will return to later in this chapter: by calling Oscar a “fat homo” Yuniors highlights how Oscar is not a ‘typical’ Dominican ‘male’ figure who is promiscuous with women but also re-evokes the homophobia expressed in the short story “Drown” analysed above.

I have argued that in *Drown*, Díaz highlights how the migrants’ experience is characterised by ongoing connections with the Dominican Republic. These connections are also crucial to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: Beli, for example, tries to temper her feelings of alienation in the United States by maintaining strong links with her homeland. Unlike the members of Iliana’s family in *Geographies of Home*, who have no contact with the country of origin, Beli sends money home to enable her adoptive mother, La Inca, to buy a small house in Santo Domingo where Beli stays every time she visits. Moreover, after her elopement with Aldo, Lola is sent to the Dominican Republic for one year to stay with La Inca and where, thanks to her mother’s remittances, she can afford to attend a private school. Here we see another emerging pattern in which money made in the United States finds its way back to the country of origin, a phenomenon developed as the result of the economic migration of the 1970s and 1980s and which reached its apex a few years ago: in 2009, according to Duany, the Dominican Republic became “the prime example of remittance economy that relies on migrants to uphold the living standards of nonmigrants.”¹⁵⁶ Overall, in fact, if the money that Beli makes in Paterson does not help much in improving her life in the United States (as it is the case for many migrants), it does make a difference in her country of origin. When Beli visits the Dominican Republic, therefore, she tries to create the illusion of success, as demonstrated by this passage in which Yuniors mocks Beli’s behaviour:

No one was funnier than their mother, who got done up like she was having an audience with King Juan Carlos of Spain himself. If she’d owned a fur she would have worn it, anything to communicate the distance she’d travelled, to emphasize how not like the rest of these dominicanos she was (272).

Understandably, given her hard life, when she is back on the island, Beli wants to show that she is a successful diasporic Dominican and those “dominicanos” she wants to be different from are the ones she wants to show off her success to. Ironically, however, Beli’s attempt to differentiate herself from “the rest of these dominicanos,” only reinforces her similarity to the

¹⁵⁶ Duany, 72. Remittance takes the form of cash, goods but also of investments of different kinds.

rest of the Dominican Americans, who also attempt to foster the illusion of a successful life in their host country: “every summer,” we are told, “Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can [and] airports choke with the overdressed” (271). At the same time, many of the Dominicans who have remained in the country celebrate and imitate American culture, often wearing clothes sent by relatives from the United States: for example, when Oscar visits the Dominican Republic, he notices that a lot of people try to adopt American fashion and he describes them as having “wannabe American looks” (280).

The paramount importance of a strong cultural connection with the country of origin is highlighted by the fact that Yunior, who unlike Oscar and Lola was born in the Dominican Republic and lived there for nine years, is regarded “as the sole gatekeeper of cultural authenticity for U.S –born Oscar.”¹⁵⁷ Oscar, in fact, is engaged in a continuous struggle to be recognised as an ‘authentic Dominican’. At the beginning of the novel, when Yunior introduces Oscar, he also establishes the parameter according to which one should judge a ‘Dominican male’: we are told that, when he was a little boy, Oscar— who, at the time had multiple girlfriends— was proudly described by Beli as her “little Porfirio Rubirosa” (12). Trujillo’s son in law Porfirio Rubirosa was an (in)famous womaniser linked to the regime who gained international reputation as a playboy for “his charm and elegance” but also for his violence against women.¹⁵⁸ Derby points out that Rubirosa, in the late 1950s, became the model for a specific and rampant form of Dominican masculinity predicated on promiscuity, and which strictly linked upward mobility with prevarication and an arbitrary exercise of power.¹⁵⁹ In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior describes the young Oscar/ “little Porfirio Rubirosa” as a “normal” Dominican boy raised in a “typical” Dominican family (11) because he has multiple girlfriends but the fact that the terms “normal” and “typical” are in inverted commas in the text simultaneously draws the reader’s attention to the problematic nature of this ‘normality’. Yunior’s use of inverted commas suggests the existence of a shared idea (shared by “typical” Dominican families) of what it is to be a “normal” Dominican; the use of the past tense, however, reveals that, the older Oscar no longer embodies this particular notion of ‘normality’ for his community. Yunior, on the other hand, perfectly fits the traditional model of Dominican

¹⁵⁷ Elena Machado Sáez, “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance,” *Contemporary Literature* v. 52, no.3 (Fall 2011), 530.

¹⁵⁸ Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Eva Woods Peiró, “Porfirio Rubirosa Masculinity, Race, and the Jet-Setting Latin Male,” in *Latin American Icons Fame Across Borders*, ed. Dianna C. Miebylski and Patrick O’Conner (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 130.

¹⁵⁹ Derby, 173-174.

masculinity and demonstrates a pride in his promiscuity and misogyny which makes him popular in the circle of his Dominican American friends. As such, Yunior's role in the narration is to embody the Dominican-American cultural background from which Oscar and Lola spring, and which exerts pressure on them but also, as we will see, on Yunior himself.

Overall, Yunior is described as a selfish guy who only cares about sleeping around. Unlike Oscar who enjoys the intimacy of his relationship with Ybón, the Dominican prostitute he later falls in love with, Yunior mostly engages in meaningless sexual intercourse and he is proud of the fact that he is caught cheating on his girlfriend: "second time I'd been caught in two years," Yunior says, "a record even for me" (175). Moreover, while allowing himself the unfair privilege offered to his gender within the Dominican-American tradition, Yunior still expects women to fulfil a specific 'ideal'. He compares contemporary women to idolised female figures from the past like Anacaona, a woman described as a beautiful indigenous queen and the widow of one of the five rulers of Hispaniola at the time of the Spanish colonisation of the island. Before being killed by the invaders, "she was offered a chance to save herself: all she had to do was marry a Spaniard who was obsessed with her", but she instead chose death (244; footnote no. 29).¹⁶⁰ Yunior continues in the footnotes, "offer that choice to a contemporary Island girl and see how fast she fills out that passport application" (244; footnote no. 29). Yunior's words contain a harsh judgement of his female peers, Dominican women who are compelled by their circumstances to accept marriages of convenience in order to survive or get a better life. The only exception to Yunior's negative attitude towards women comes in his relationship with Lola. Yunior is attracted to Lola despite the fact that her body lacks traditionally feminine features (she is "almost six feet tall and no tetas at all" (168)) but he is also drawn to her toughness: he admiringly describes how Lola fought with "boys and packs of morena girls [dark-skinned Latinas] who hated her thin nose and straightish hair" (15). One could argue that Yunior is

¹⁶⁰ The text of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* features many footnotes, asides by which the novel's narrator, Yunior, communicates additional, contextual, information to the reader. These footnotes often contain crucial information on the history of the Dominican Republic or on science fiction and comic books which the narrator assumes his reader will not be acquainted with. While the earlier footnotes appear to be stated by an anonymous narrator, in the third chapter it is made clear that Yunior is the narrator of both the main text and these asides. Sometimes Yunior's footnotes communicate moral judgements and criticism based on his personal beliefs and the traditions he grew up with, but also reveal his own insecurities, jealousy, and shortcomings; these footnotes, therefore, also add to the characterisation of Yunior while accentuating his claim for authority over his story. Other footnotes instead tell (always from a subjective perspective) complementary stories which run parallel yet to the side of the main narrative further questioning, often directly, the authenticity of the stories delivered to the public by the governments of both the Dominican Republic and the United States and revealing their inconsistencies. A purpose of this, Boyden comments that, "instead of filling the gaps, Díaz's footnotes draw the reader's attention to the impossibility of telling the entire truth" (27).

attracted to Lola more than other girls because she has “masculine” characteristics, and, as such, he considers her as an equal.

Lola, as we have seen with the example of her elopement with Aldo, actively tries to escape from the expectations of her community which, amongst other things, have deprived her of a proper childhood: from the age of eight, in fact, Lola was responsible for the housework fulfilling the role of “the perfect Dominican daughter” (56). As Lola puts it: “I stayed at home and made sure Oscar was fed and that everything ran right while she was at work. *I raised him and I raised me*” [my italics] (56). Paradoxically, precisely because she “raises” herself, Lola is able to rethink her own identity outside traditional role allocations and independently from the Dominican tradition according to which a mother has the right to direct her daughter’s actions. “She was my Old World Dominican mother” Lola explains, “and I was her only daughter [...] which meant it was her duty to keep me crushed under her heel” (55). As we have seen, in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Yolanda calls her father a dictator when he tries to control what she is writing for her school speech (147) and in *Geographies of Home*, Iliana also feels “silenced” by her strict religious father (10). Yolanda, Iliana and Lola, then, see their parents’ actions as a form of tyranny validated by the Dominican tradition but while Alvarez and Pérez forcibly criticise the patriarchal Dominican society particularly for the way in which it allows the *male* parent to control their children, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz takes a different approach and portrays an authoritative *female* parent who perpetuates the patriarchal standards of Dominican culture. Being a single mother, in fact, Beli plays the role of both parents in the family, and tries to ensure the acceptance of her children within the Dominican community in the United States by forcing them to behave according to traditional models. Lola, however, rejects these models in every way she can, particularly when Beli is weakened by cancer (55), and her first act of rebellion is cutting her hair short to adopt a style in keeping with the Goth subculture. Lola’s Goth aesthetic does not only classify her as a disobedient child in her mother’s eyes but also distances her from her Dominican background. Juanita Heredia argues that Lola adopts the Goth style to “consciously remove herself from the island’s culture”¹⁶¹ but it is evident that the Goth style also differentiates Lola from the other minorities within her neighbourhood who pick on her for her looks. When Lola goes to high school dressed as a Goth “the Puerto Rican kids on the block couldn’t stop laughing when they saw my hair, they called me Blacula, and the morenos, they didn’t know what to say: they just called me devil-bitch. Yo,

¹⁶¹ Juanita Heredia, “The Dominican Diaspora Strikes Back: Cultural Archive and Race in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” in *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration Narratives of Displacement*, ed. Vanessa Pérez Rosario (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 216.

devil-bitch, yo, yo!”(54)¹⁶² However, I want to argue here that Lola’s actions are not only aimed at removing herself from her Dominican background, but are also driven by her wish to belong, in some sense, to the wider American society. The Goth culture, as Yuniors specifies, at the time, was associated with white adolescents while a Latino/a Goth was seen as something alien: “in 1990 us niggers were having trouble wrapping our heads around goths, period-but a [Latino] goth, that was as strange to us as a black Nazi” (182).

Lola does not only feel marginalised as a Dominican migrant in the United States and as a non-conformist member of the Dominican-American community but also as a ‘returnee’ in the Dominican Republic where she is sent for a year as a punishment for her failed attempt to live with Aldo: “if you think it was tough being a Goth in Paterson,” Lola says, “try being a Dominican York in one of those private schools back in Dominican Republic. You will never meet bitchier girls in your whole life” (71). The hostile attitude of the Dominican students towards Lola could be explained by their envy for the breath of her experience and for her connection with the United States but it also echoes a developing collective consciousness in the Dominican Republic since the late 1970s. According to Howard, “social problems in Dominican society were increasingly blamed on influences brought to the island from the United States.”¹⁶³ Whilst in the Dominican Republic, in fact, Lola also defeats society’s expectations (albeit secretly) in her choice of boyfriend: in Santo Domingo, in fact, she goes out with Max, a “morenito” [dark-skinned] guy who does not belong to ‘the high class’ in the Dominican Republic. As a Dominican American with an American passport, Lola is perceived as having a superior social status to Max and she is aware of that “if any of the stuck up bitches in school saw us they would just about die, *but* I’m fond of him” (73) [my italics]. On the surface, however, Lola tries her best to fit into the Dominican society — she even allows a friend to help her look like a “real Dominican girl” (71) — but the more she tries to look “Dominican”, the more she loses her sense of identity, to the point that she ends up admitting: “Sometimes when I see myself in mirrors I don’t even know who I am anymore” (71).

Similarly, if Yuniors perfectly conforms to the stereotypical promiscuous Dominican male, we know that he also actively ‘suppresses’ parts of himself in order to be accepted by his community. Oscar’s love for science fiction, fantasy and animation is patent but Yuniors is rather circumspect about his interests: for example, he ridicules Oscar for watching Japanese anime:

¹⁶² “Blacula” is Dracula’s black disciple in *Blacula*, a film directed by William Crain and released in 1972. It is interesting in relation to Lola’s ‘masculine appearance’ that Blacula in the film is a male character. Incidentally, Lola’s narration does not only show that she was annoyed by her fellow students at school, but also signposts the presence of numerous Puerto Ricans.

¹⁶³ Howard, 103.

“his happiest moments were genre moments, like when *Akira* was released (1988)” (50) but the fact that Yunior can remember the exact year in which *Akira* was released shows that he shares the same fascination as Oscar.¹⁶⁴ Yunior also rewrites the story of the dictator Trujillo and Oscar’s grandfather Abelard in a parody of Tolkien’s fantasy. Trujillo is portrayed as the Dark Lord Sauron, who has demonic powers and who puts a curse on Abelard. Yunior informs us that “Trujillo was certainly formidable, and the regime was like a Caribbean Mordor in many ways” (226). Trujillo, it is worth remembering, was perceived almost as a supernatural being by Dominicans or, in Yunior’s words, “it was whispered that he did not sleep, did not sweat, that he could see, smell, feel events hundreds of miles away, [...] You wonder why two generations later our parents are still so damn secretive” (226). The parents’ fear of the dictatorship, in Díaz’s fiction, also results in the estrangement of their children who are denied access to their parents’ memories, experiences and stories and have to rely on the powers of the imagination when reconstructing the past. The story of the de León’s family, in fact, is mostly Yunior’s reconstruction of events he has not witnessed and which were never properly related to him and the novel often highlights this aspect: for example, we are reminded by Yunior that Beli never talked about her past, yet he tells Beli’s story in great details. Every now and then, moreover, Yunior reminds the reader that the novel is a work of fiction and it is up to the readers to believe: “I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao [...] This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix” (285). In the fourth chapter, however, Yunior openly admits his interest in the speculative genres (“I liked shit like *Akira*” (172)) and it is clear that he adopts a cynical disguise in order to insure his acceptance in the Dominican-American and the wider community of Paterson. Yunior himself highlights the devastating effects of peer pressure and the importance of submitting to social codes and of suppressing, or at least hiding, one’s sense of self in order to ‘fit in’: “perhaps, if like me [Oscar]’d been able to hide his otakuness [obsession with Japanese Manga, Anime, and video game] maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn’t” (21).

Overall, therefore, when both Lola and Yunior try to negotiate their position vis-à-vis the Dominican-American community of New Jersey, within other minority groups and/or mainstream American society, or amongst their peers in both the United States and the Dominican Republic, they seem to contrive to hide some aspects of their true identities. Oscar, in

¹⁶⁴ Lola too shares Oscar’s interests to an extent: she dresses as Wonder Woman at parties and, at some point she keeps a journal which, she hopes, might survive a radioactive kibble and “form the foundation for a utopian society” (65).

contrast, never compromises to be accepted by others even if he is well aware that he does not correspond to the traditional Dominican male figure. Beli puts pressure on Oscar to act in specific ways from a very early age: for example, when he feels rejected by one of the many girls he falls in love with (unreciprocated) and reacts by becoming a recluse, Beli complains: “you ain’t a woman to be staying in the house” (22; footnote no. 6). For Beli, violence is also an important sign of manhood: when Oscar’s childhood girlfriend dumps him, Beli says he should slap her instead of crying over her: “dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you” (14). Distressingly, despite the fact that Beli herself was abused by Trujillo’s brother in law — who reminds one of Rubirosa who was also known for his violence towards women¹⁶⁵ — she perpetuates this type of masculinity by pressurising her son to follow the traditional ‘model’ of the (homophobic) Dominican macho. Oscar’s uncle Rudolfo, in fact, considers promiscuity as the making of a man and before Oscar goes to Rutgers, he gives him “a box of condoms,” telling him to “use them all,” adding: “on girls” (49).

Rutgers University plays an important part in Oscar’s life and in Díaz’s exploration of marginal experiences. It is at Rutgers University that both Lola and Yunior are exposed to the revolutionary movements of the 1980s which campaigned for the acceptance of minorities and the imposition of equal rights. Díaz paints a vivid picture of the general atmosphere at Rutgers when he was a student, the period chosen for his novel: “[we] were all activists-there was apartheid, black nationalism was on the rise, Rutgers had a hard-core feminist movement- we were very caught up in it” (50). It is not surprising that in the novel Lola becomes involved in the political scene as an activist championing the rights of women and minorities. Lola is characterised as “a Big Woman on Campus [who] knew just about everybody with any pigment, had her hand on every protest and every march” (50). Through her political and activist engagement, Lola, who had previously rejected her Dominican background when she escaped with Aldo, reconnects with the wider Spanish-speaking community, a connection further strengthened when, after graduation, she marries a Cuban man. Rutgers initially seems to be a promising place for Oscar because of, as Yunior puts it, its “institutional pretense that allowed a mutant like him to approach without causing a panic” (267). Nevertheless, unlike his sister Lola, who is fully engaged in political activism on campus, the timid Oscar is quickly isolated from the rest of the students. Initially, in a state of utter desperation, Oscar does attempt to make himself more like the typical Dominican male in order to be accepted by his peers and appealing to female students: he “decided at last to be like Roberto Durán [...] lost the mustache [...] the

¹⁶⁵ Paravisini-Gebert and Woods-Peiró, 130.

glasses, bought contacts with the money he was making at the lumberyard and tried to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness” (30). His new look, however, does not last for long as he quickly abandons his attempt to project a new image. Partly as a favour to Lola who is concerned for her brother, Yuniór offers to live with him in Demarest dormitory which he describes as “home of all weirdos and losers and freaks and fem-bots” (170). Díaz, who also stayed at Demarest when he studied at Rutgers, has explained that “Demarest is Rutgers in the most profound way for the very reason that it’s unique and special and, in some ways, seems to be outside of it”¹⁶⁶ and, in the novel, he capitalises on its marginalised status by associating it with Oscar.

When they live in Demarest together, in order to help Oscar improve his relationship with women and to minimise the extent to which he is excluded from Dominican male society, Yuniór mentors him on how to behave in the company of women and attempts (in vain) to reshape Oscar’s obese body by way of exercise (176). As Beli had done before, Yuniór, blames Oscar’s lack of ‘manliness’ on the fact that he spends too much time indoors reading comic books and fantasy rather than going out or spending time in the gym to work on his appearance. While Yuniór is sincerely sympathetic towards Oscar’s plight, his advice is ultimately another attempt to make him endorse the received Dominican concept of masculinity, and to pressurise Oscar into adopting the dominant subculture for which Yuniór has become a spokesperson. As Sáez observes, Yuniór’s support for, and “solidarity” with, Oscar is quickly compromised by his strong competitive streak.¹⁶⁷ Yuniór in fact becomes jealous of Oscar’s friendship with a girl called Jenni, who had previously ignored Yuniór. He expresses his jealousy by emphasising his manhood bragging about the number of girls he is sleeping with: “I should have been happy for the Wao. I mean, honestly, who was I to begrudge Oscar a little action? Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same time [...] But of course I begrudged the motherfucker” (185). Interestingly, however, Yuniór’s confidence is revealed as fragile, since it becomes increasingly evident that he also feels threatened by Oscar’s ‘anti-Dominican’ male ideal. Yuniór’s attempts to remould Oscar can also be seen as Yuniór’s need to neutralise the threat of what he perceives as an alternative template of masculinity, especially when Oscar refuses to follow his advice and stops exercising: “these days I have to ask myself: What made me angrier? That Oscar, the fat loser, quit, or that Oscar, the fat loser, defied me?” (181). By going against Yuniór’s, his mother’s and society’s expectations, Oscar, defies the dominant

¹⁶⁶ Rich Shea, “Star Power: The New Voice in Fiction,” *Rutgers Magazine* (Spring 2010) <<http://magazine.rutgers.edu/features/spring-2010/star-power>> (accessed 06 December 2013).

¹⁶⁷ Sáez, 525.

model of the Dominican male: the fact that Yuniór finds the concept of masculinity embodied by Oscar destabilising and in need of being ‘exorcised’ can be seen in Yuniór’s repeated attempts to emasculate Oscar: we have already seen how he equates him to the “fat homo” Oscar Wilde, but for instance, he also describes Oscar as weak because he cannot play sports — he “threw a ball like a *girl*” (20) — and for lacking “all aggressive and martial tendencies” (15). Importantly, however, Oscar’s marginalisation in the Dominican-American community is not due to the fact that he lacks aggressive and martial tendencies but rather to his active refusal to follow the traditional model readily embraced by Yuniór: as it becomes progressively clear that it is Oscar’s choice to diverge from society’s expectations, we slowly come to see him as strong rather than weak.

Oscar’s defiant streak becomes particularly evident when, after his graduation from Rutgers, he goes to Santo Domingo for the summer and refuses to listen to his relatives who warn him against going out with Ybón, a prostitute with whom he falls desperately in love. Unfortunately Ybón’s ‘boyfriend’ is a violent member of the Dominican police who mobilises two of his henchmen to teach Oscar a lesson when he finds out that he is spending so much time with Ybón. Like Beli before him -who was attacked and left for dead by two thugs sent by her lover’s jealous wife- Oscar is beaten up ferociously and only narrowly escapes death. When he returns to the United States, in poor shape but miraculously alive, everybody hopes that he will forget Ybón. It is, however, after his close-to-death experience that Oscar decides to take control over his own life and to challenge the *fukú* which had cursed his family for generations:

It dawned on him that the family curse he’d heard about his whole life might actually be *true*.

Fukú.

He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you* (303-4).

When he is finally dismissed from hospital, Oscar surprises everyone by going back to the Dominican Republic on his own to be with Ybón, risking his own life. Oscar also continues to disrupt stereotypical depictions of Dominican masculinity when, once he finally manages to spend a few days away alone with Ybón (and finally loses his virginity), he highlights his appreciation for the “intimacy” they shared rather than expressing enthusiasm for sexual intercourse (334). Oscar explains in a letter to Yuniór that “what really got him was not the bam-bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated, like

combing her hair or [...] like listening to her tell him about being a little girl and him telling her that he'd been a virgin all his life" (334). His choice to return to Santo Domingo, however, ultimately proves fatal and Oscar is killed in a canefield by the same thugs who had previously beaten him up and who work for Ybón's pimp. While his tragic end might seem to reinforce the existence of a *fukú* or curse on the de León family — the attack against him in the canefield uncannily replicates the attack against Beli — Oscar's premature demise leaves a crucial legacy: at the end of the novel, it is made clear that it is because of his influence that Yunior becomes a "new man," gets married and manages to remain (mostly) faithful to his wife: "I don't run around after girls anymore. Not much, anyway" (326).¹⁶⁸

It is crucial to highlight that both Oscar and Yunior are writers and that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is, in fact, a novel written by Yunior to make sense of Oscar's life and experience and to provide a counterspell to the *fukú* which has afflicted the de León family, but also, by extension, all Dominicans and Dominican Americans, for a long time. Unfortunately, Oscar's final book, the one he wrote just before dying, when he refused to accept the power of *fukú* and which "contains everything" Oscar "thinks" his family and friends "will need" or, as he puts it, "the cure to what ails us [...] The Cosmo DNA" (333), was posted by him from the Dominican Republic but never reached Yunior. Yunior's newly-found faith in women, however, enables him to put his hopes for a permanent defeat of *fukú* and of the predetermined negative future that it represents in Isis, Lola's daughter. Isis lives in Paterson with Lola and her Cuban husband and is raised, crucially, as a bilingual speaker of English and Spanish, a fact that indicates that Lola who, as a teenager, wanted to run away from Paterson, her own mother, and "Spanish" (55), is now finally able to acknowledge and value both her legacies.¹⁶⁹ In the closing pages of the novel, Yunior declares to have kept all Oscar's notebooks, manuscripts and papers to help Isis in her battle against *fukú*: "maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (330-1).

It goes without saying that Yunior's book — which is Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* — is also supposed to play an important role in Isis' anti-*fukú* arsenal where the

¹⁶⁸ Díaz's third book, *This is How You Lose Her*, also relates how the same narrator, Yunior, recasts cheating not as something to brag about but instead as a "problem" which he struggles to tackle.

¹⁶⁹ At this point, the university-educated Lola has also reconnected to traditional folk beliefs: in the attempt to protect her daughter from *fukú* she gives her a necklace with three 'amulets' "three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca [...] Powerful elder magic" (329). In contrast to Beli, thanks to her education, Lola gets the chance to be supportive of her daughter since she works as a teacher and lives with her husband who helps her with the finances: the tensions that strained Lola's relationship with Beli are nowhere to be found in this mother-daughter relationship.

ability to see one's composite legacy as a richness is also crucial -after all, Yunion says "she'll take all *we've* done and all *we've* learned" [my italics] (330). According to Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* "argues that if you want to understand the heart of anything, you look first to the margins, to the thing that's the weirdest"¹⁷⁰ and, arguably, in the novel, Oscar is presented as the 'weirdest' of characters, a key through which to understand the world. In the author's words, Oscar is the "particular" or the "dot in the community"¹⁷¹ and "interest in the particular guarantees to a certain degree that across the board people will feel like this is speaking to a community."¹⁷² Díaz believes that the value of art is that it brings to the fore "stuff that isn't being discussed or described in the present media" and, in so doing, provide those who, like Oscar, are victims of marginalisation, with a reflection of themselves which might help them change their lives, the way in which they are perceived by society but also the ways in which their immediate community perceive them and itself.¹⁷³ The fact that the "particular" or the "dot in the community" can change individual and collective perceptions and self-perceptions and better represent a collectivity which, like the Dominican-American community, is characterised by hybrid identities, is also suggested by the epigraph of the novel, an extract from Derek Walcott's 'The Schooner *Flight*'. Here the protagonist of the poem defines himself in these terms: "*I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation*". Similarly, Oscar could be perceived as a 'nobody' -an irrelevant, marginalised and excluded individual who has Santo Domingo, Paterson, 'nerdiness' and a different understanding of (Dominican) masculinity in him- but, simultaneously, also as someone who can contain multitudes and be representative of his "nation" or, in this case, of his transnational community.

In the following chapter, Angie Cruz's novel *Soledad* offers us the experience of another individual -this time a female artist rather than a male writer- who feels like an 'outsider' in a different Dominican-American community, namely the community of Washington Heights, New York. As we will see, Cruz also investigates (albeit in different ways) how outsiders to mainstream society and migrant communities can be instrumental in formulating a productive critique of the status quo and investigating the role that this critique can play in individual but also collective identity negotiations.

¹⁷⁰ Shea.

¹⁷¹ Chicago Humanities Festival. "Junot Díaz & Peter Sagal: Immigrants, Masculinity, Nerds, & Art," [Oct 16, 2013], video clip, YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TA8X6TUA83k>> (accessed 13 January 2014).

¹⁷² Junot Díaz & Peter Sagal.

¹⁷³ " Junot Diaz: In His Own Words ."

Chapter Four

The Hope of Reconciliation: The Dominican-American Experience in Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001)

In the previous chapter, I considered Junot Díaz's decision to put an ostracised individual at the centre of his writing process and to examine his experience within the context of the diasporic community. Díaz, in fact, recognises the importance of addressing the peculiar outsider's perspective and to foreground individual experiences as a means to reflect on the ways in which the Dominican-American community understands itself, its past and its future. In *Soledad*,¹⁷⁴ Angie Cruz also depicts the experience of a non-conformist individual and her contribution to the community's self-definition whilst highlighting the price that artists (or, by extension, writers) have to pay when they play their part in the overall process of negotiations and renegotiations of collective and individual identities and in dismantling disabling dominant discourses; as she puts it, "art, in its best form, will be questioning the status quo and when you do that you remain outside."¹⁷⁵

Cruz undoubtedly incorporates some biographical elements in her novel. Cruz and her protagonist, the titular Soledad, both grew up in Washington Heights, Upper Manhattan, in New York City, around the late 1980s and 1990s. Cruz's choice of this exact neighbourhood is significant not only because it is the place of her upbringing, but also because, as we have seen, it is well known for being the "heavily Dominican part of Manhattan."¹⁷⁶ Duany reports that: "between 1983 and 1989, over 40,000 Dominicans settled in Washington Heights and the adjacent neighborhoods of Inwood and Hamilton Heights" and explains that many of the new arrivals were members of families which had already migrated and settled there.¹⁷⁷ The area still has many diasporic communities – before the waves of Dominican migration to the area, Washington Heights consisted of many other migrant groups such as the Irish, Greeks, Puerto Ricans and others¹⁷⁸ – but today, it accommodates the largest concentration of Dominicans in New York. The main events of the novel take place in 164th Street in Washington Heights, the

¹⁷⁴ Angie Cruz, *Soledad* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2001). Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses in the text.

¹⁷⁵ Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Writing has to be Generous: An Interview with Angie Cruz," *Calabash A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* v. 2, no.2 (summer/fall 2003): 121.

¹⁷⁶ Cristina Herrera, "The Madwoman Speaks: Madness and Motherhood in Angie Cruz's 'Soledad'," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* v. 7, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 56.

¹⁷⁷ Jorge Duany, *Quisqueya on the Hudson: The Transnational Identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights*, [1994] (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2008), 29-30, 48.

¹⁷⁸ Duany, *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, 29.

street on which Cruz grew up, and a place for which she has said she feels a “strong love”: as she later explained, she only left the neighbourhood for the sake of her studies, moving back after graduation.¹⁷⁹

Cruz was born in Washington Heights in 1972 to first generation Dominican migrants. Cruz’s mother was sixteen while her father was in his thirties when they got married: while Cruz’s mother only migrated to New York after her marriage, Cruz’s father migrated to the United States, where he was a “seasonal worker,” in the early 1960s and helped other Dominicans settle in Washington Heights.¹⁸⁰ Cruz’s mother had no choice in choosing her husband; her family imposed him on her in recognition of his status as a resident in the United States, with all the promises of financial prosperity it offered.¹⁸¹ The marriage, however, was not a happy one: Cruz’s mother suffered from the constant physical abuse of her alcoholic husband, and sought a divorce when Cruz was six years old.¹⁸² Although Cruz’s mother remained in Washington Heights, where she was eventually joined by her brothers, sisters and parents,¹⁸³ she did not speak English and had no education so, after the divorce, Cruz took care of her younger brother to allow her mother to study and find a job. After finishing a course in visual arts at high school, Cruz went to Binghamton University in 1994 to take her BA in Literature.¹⁸⁴ Afterwards, she was funded to finish her Masters in Fine Arts at New York University (NYU), a programme of study that she later admitted would have been unaffordable if she had been required to pay her own fees.¹⁸⁵ Echoes of Cruz’s experiences can be found in Soledad’s story: like Cruz, she is raised in a female-headed household in Washington Heights and, at the age of thirteen, she works alongside her brother to help her mother pay the bills. Soledad also shares Cruz’s interest in the arts and she also secures a scholarship to fund her university studies. Both Cruz-the-writer and Soledad-the-visual-artist, moreover, aspire to be recognised as artists (like Alvarez’s Yo and Díaz’s Yuniór and Oscar) and the novel investigates the complex predicament of a Dominican American artist within the community of Washington Heights, in New York, and in wider American society. In particular, Cruz demonstrates the difficulties that a working class female Dominican American artist can experience, being torn between a diasporic community that may

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 109-120.

¹⁸⁰ Angie Cruz, “The Story Behind the Novel: In Search of Caridad,” *South Central Review* v. 27, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 78, 74, 79.

¹⁸¹ Cruz, *In Search of Caridad*, 74.

¹⁸² Cruz, *In Search of Caridad*, 75.

¹⁸³ Interview with Torres-Saillant, (2003), 109.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 110-4.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 115.

be unsupportive and the predominantly white artistic establishment which, in its turn, tends to exclude those from marginalised communities.

Cruz differentiates between herself and her character by choosing a more dramatic and traumatic life for her protagonist. From the beginning of the novel, we know that Soledad does not want to be associated with her family or her neighbourhood. The novel begins with a twenty-year-old Soledad reluctantly returning to her family at 164th street in Washington Heights after two years spent in the East Village in pursuit of her career as an artist. Her return to the neighbourhood follows a call from her aunt which informs her that her mother, Olivia, has lapsed into an “emotional coma” (16) which is described as a type of catatonia. For Soledad, the neighbourhood is full of bad memories and initially she has no plans to stay in her childhood home and she only stays in order to deal with her mother’s sickness. These opening pages of the novel are written in the first-person voice and give us direct access to Soledad’s thoughts, but thereafter the narration moves back and forth from first-person to third-person narrative voice. Each of the book’s eleven chapters, in fact, is composed of a different number of sections divided by asterisks to indicate the shift in the perspective of the narrative voice. While Soledad narrates her own sections, those about her cousin Flaca and her mother Olivia switch between first person and third person. The sections about Gorda and Victor, Soledad’s aunt and uncle, instead, are narrated exclusively in the third person. This approach to narrative voice is designed to emphasise Soledad’s estrangement from her community: for example, Cruz does not allow the reader to access Gorda’s, Victor’s or Flaca’s feelings about the community or the world around them, yet, Soledad’s separation from her community is conveyed to the reader through direct complaint, judgment and criticism.

Cruz invites the reader to see the traumatic past of the migrant family as an explanation for Soledad’s emotional separation from its members. As Herrera observes, Olivia’s condition is what drives the plot rather than the actions of the protagonist herself as the mother is unable or unwilling to talk and, occasionally, her behaviour is erratic: once she stands naked in front of her window, causing panic in the neighbourhood and in her family.¹⁸⁶ Herrera also refers to Olivia’s condition as a type of “madness”.¹⁸⁷ The narrative suggests that her illness has been caused by some form of post-traumatic anxiety, although it is not based on any specific event, but the result of many years of disappointments. This condition, in fact, emerges many years after the death of her disloyal and abusive husband Manolo but is presented as the result of her relationship with him, as well as of her preceding experience as a sex-worker at the age of fifteen in the

¹⁸⁶ Herrera, 57.

¹⁸⁷ Herrera, 52.

Dominican Republic. The sections that recount Olivia's past are narrated in a third-person — which, as Herrera points out, creates a “narrative distance” from a “trauma and pain” which are sometimes “impossible” to “speak/write” about — while the sections dealing with her current feelings towards her family, and her daughter specifically, are in the more immediate first-person.¹⁸⁸ These feelings are conveyed to the readers in the forms of Olivia's thoughts but are never directly expressed to her daughter: this heightens Soledad's feelings of isolation as, whilst her mother is in her ‘catatonic’ state, she has no access to her affectionate concerns but is only able to remember their previous estrangement.

Olivia's life is presented as a very hard one: in her native San Pedro de Macoris, at the age of sixteen, she is expected to marry an older man who has American citizenship to facilitate the relocation in the United States of the rest of her family. To escape from this arranged marriage, Olivia moves to the Dominican tourist destination of Puerto Plata to look for a job and support herself. There, she meets a Swedish man who promises her a good job as a model but then takes advantage of her lack of money and convinces her to be a sex worker for tourists. When she becomes pregnant, Olivia persuades herself and one of her clients, Manolo — a Dominican resident in the United States — that the baby is his; he proposes marriage, provides her with a fake passport and brings her with him to Washington Heights where Olivia gives birth to Soledad. In the Dominican Republic, Olivia, like most prospective emigrants, dreams of the wealth awaiting her in the United States, imagining “herself walking down the famous New York streets that were supposed to be lined with gold, and the buildings so tall they touched the clouds” (66). These high expectations only exacerbate her feelings of disappointment when faced with reality as Manolo practically locks her in their flat for six years. After Manolo's (seemingly) accidental death, with no English, skills, or education, Olivia is forced to work as a cleaner for up to three shifts a day with no hope of any improvement in her working conditions.

Cruz bases her narrative on her own observations of real life working conditions in Washington Heights around the chosen period. In 1994 Duany and others showed that most Dominican Americans in Washington Heights occupied the “low-wage and low-skilled service sector,” after being “displaced from light manufacturing [in New York], especially the garment industry.”¹⁸⁹ Duany reaches the conclusion that, at that point, Dominican Americans were “moving sideways or downwards in the labor market”¹⁹⁰ so, while Pérez's *Geographies of Home* describes the difficult predicament of impoverished families whose children had to work in the

¹⁸⁸ Herrera, 59.

¹⁸⁹ Duany. *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, 44.

¹⁹⁰ Duany. *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, 44. This study, however, fails to recognise the difference between first and second generation of migrants in their career development.

garment factories of late 1960s Brooklyn, in *Soledad*'s 1990s setting, Cruz's characters are forced to occupy even lower paid, unskilled jobs. The novel, in fact, invites the reader to see the attitudes of most of the male characters (Manolo, Gorda's husband Raful, Olivia's brother Victor, and Olivia's father Don Fernando), who are often depicted as selfish and irresponsible, in the light of the harsh work conditions they were forced to endure, and, in some respects, as a consequence of the disappointment and sense of betrayal felt by aspirational Dominican Americans (of both genders) about their lives in the United States. For example, Olivia, Soledad recalls, contextualises Manolo's violence as a result of "stress that made him crazy" because "he had to work very hard. He had a lot on his mind" (213). Likewise, Gorda gives us an account of Raful's struggles with the job market, suggesting it may be part of the reason for his decision to abandon his family:

I remember how much fun he made of men who took jobs boys could do. He would say, you want to see me get a job making hamburgers? I'll move back to my country before that ever happens. He said it over and over again those months he sat at home and didn't work, leaving it up to me to wipe old men's asses and working at factories so we could have something to eat (93).

All Dominican American characters in the novel are affected by the insecurity of their jobs. Both Olivia and Gorda work long hours simply to hold on to their jobs and Gorda must return to her work shortly after giving birth to her only daughter if she does not want to become unemployed. Gorda and Olivia, in fact, take on the financial responsibility for keeping their families afloat since they both have (or had) irresponsible husbands, who make no cash contribution at all to the household budget. The story of the aged Doña Sosa -Olivia's mother- also illustrates the financial hardships imposed on the community by a rigid, unforgiving, job market: despite her advanced age, Doña Sosa has to work in a factory after her husband falls ill since they have no savings but only "the small social security checks he received from early retirement and disability" (118).

Cruz shows very clearly how these difficult working conditions widened the gap between Soledad and her family because, like Lola in Díaz's novel, Soledad feels estranged from her mother at an early age because of her mother's anti-social work hours: "days would pass without us saying a word to each other. She would come home from work. I'd start dinner by boiling the water for the rice. And she'd cook while I did my homework" (6-7). Soledad resents her mother

for her unavailability but also for her severity, emotional coldness, and her lack of understanding for her aspirations as an artist and, we are told, she often resorts to fantasising about “finding [her] mother dead” (6). The novel also examines the tension between mother and daughter in relation to Manolo’s death. At the outset of the novel, Olivia paints Manolo’s death as an accident, while the reader later learns that she actually pushed him out of a window he was repairing. The fact that the murder takes place in front of the six-year-old Soledad, who does not fully remember the unfolding of the event, leaves both mother and daughter with deep emotional scars and seriously hampers their ability to communicate with one another (6).

Manolo’s violence towards Olivia also plays a crucial role in the separation of mother and daughter. As Soledad grows up, it becomes obvious to Manolo that the little girl has a lighter skin colour and straighter hair than either of her parents and that it is likely that she is not his biological daughter. To try and defuse his growing anger, Olivia sends her daughter to stay with Doña Sosa in the Dominican Republic for increasingly longer periods of time so that she: “could pretend it was only them [she and her husband]. She did this so the house would have less tension, be more peaceful.”¹⁹¹ Olivia’s solution, however, is only temporary as “when Soledad returns home, his outbursts of rage started all over again” (140). Unaware that her mother is, in fact, trying to protect her from Manolo, Soledad feels abandoned and unwanted as the distance between mother and daughter progressively widens: “every day, she pushed me farther away from her, until she didn’t have to push me anymore. I just left” (206). Even before leaving, however, Soledad distances herself from her mother in more than one way: she anxiously looks for (and draws comfort from) the differences between them. We are told that Soledad “held on to the fact that [she didn’t] look like [her] mother” (6). “Maybe our lips are the same, full and pink,” she concedes, “but my hair falls pin straight, my eyes are smaller, shaped like almonds, and my skin is fairer” (6). Notably, Cruz gives Soledad Caucasian features to distinguish her from her mother and her community in general; in her interview, Cruz explains her choice by saying: “I think color really matters. Also I think hair texture does make a big difference [...] I think that a lot of Soledad’s feeling like an outsider has to do with her light skin.”¹⁹² In Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, as we have seen, Sandra feels estranged from her three sisters because of her fairer skin-colour, and this eventually leads to a mental breakdown. Soledad’s separation from her community, however, is not only predicated on looks but it is also to do with traits and actions as well: as Cruz herself admits, Soledad “didn’t trust the girls from

¹⁹¹ He is thought (by the characters) to be Soledad’s father till the end of the novel, but it is not actually clear whether Manolo is her father or not.

¹⁹² Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 122.

the neighborhood, and she didn't act like those girls or dated the guys from the neighborhood. Those attitudes just set her farther apart."¹⁹³ One additional, crucial factor that sets Soledad further apart from her community, however, is her strong will to escape the existing social conventions which govern her neighbourhood. Soledad's extended family in Washington Heights, in fact, expands and enhances the structures of patriarchal power. For instance, Soledad keeps the conditions of her flat in East Village a secret from her family, worried that if she tells them the truth, they will "send [her] uncle Victor to tie [her] up on the hood of his Camaro and bring [her] back home, kicking and screaming" (1). While, as we will see, Olivia criticises the conventions of male authority, she also perpetuates patriarchy as the result of the manner in which she is raised within her parents' house; in fact, it is only when Don Fernando falls ill that Doña Sosa is able to claim some authority in her own house. We are told that "at first she was afraid he might become violent or leave her for good but [then] she realized he had nowhere else to go. He needed her. He didn't have any money" (118). However, if Doña Sosa has suffered from her husband's authoritarianism and from his threats of physical violence, she still maintains her son's Victor privileges as a man: in his thirties, Victor is depicted as still relying on his mother to do his shopping and provide him with somewhere to live (3).

In *Soledad*, we are shown how in Washington Heights both men and women are expected to act according to the gender-based expectations of their communities. Like Yuniór in Díaz's novel, Victor struggles with his own definition of masculinity: he shows sympathy and affection towards his mistreated mother and sisters but he is also unfaithful in his relationships and occasionally violent. When Victor denounces the deceased Manolo for having being violent, Olivia takes it as a cue to criticise men in general, announcing that violence is not one man's deed but a common characteristic of all men and challenges Victor saying: "are you so different?" (118). Victor objects to his sister's accusation, saying that he would "never hit a woman" but she replies "you drink and cheat. That's bad enough" (188). Like Yuniór, when Victor starts getting closer to and respecting women, he begins to ponder his inherited privileges as a man: "his father [...] took away ten years from his mother's life, who had to work, and take care of him because he couldn't do anything for himself. Victor thinks about his father and how he doesn't want to end up like him" (188). Like Yuniór, Victor eventually settles down with one woman, proposing to his persistent girlfriend Isabel.

Cruz also makes it clear that disabling patriarchal structures have been transferred to the United States at the same time as other social and ethnic (discriminative) categorisations: for example,

¹⁹³ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 122.

we are told that Doña Sosa endured a lower social status than her husband in the Dominican Republic because she had Haitian origins. She informs Olivia that “it was rare to have a man like your father pick a woman like me as a wife. I mean, we were the kind that had a few too many feet in a Haitian kitchen” (186). Cruz vividly depicts how Dominican anti-Haitianism is transferred to the community of Washington Heights: for example, even though Gorda has Haitian origins through her mother, she still looks down at Caty, her daughter’s best friend because “she’s Haitiana, and Gorda doesn’t know about those people” (41-2).

In *Soledad*, the overwhelming presence of the traditionalist Dominican-American community and of an extended family are depicted as a burden and a threat: Soledad feels that she loses her individuality whenever she is close to her family because, like Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, she feels that she has to suppress parts of her own personality. Soledad declares: “no matter how strong I feel away from them,” she announces, “when I’m around them I acquiesce and lose all my power” (12). Like Lola, who perceives the community of Paterson as a closed world, Soledad also feels that Washington Heights is a “prison” which she needs to escape from (3). Soledad complains:

In the eighteen years I lived with my mother, my family moved in and out of each other’s apartments, trading beds as if they were playing musical chairs [...] front doors wide open, revolving, with neighbors and family coming through from D.R. One day I thought I had my own room, the next day I was sharing my room with three little cousins who belong to Tío So-and-so who just arrived from some campo I hadn’t heard of (178).

While Soledad is frustrated with her mother, family, and neighbourhood, Cruz is careful to clarify that it is Soledad’s intention of becoming an artist that ultimately pushes her to leave; most importantly, Cruz has underlined that Soledad “chose to be an artist and she chose to move out, I think that set her apart even more than color.”¹⁹⁴ In a way, it is in the nature of the artist to be different from his/her surroundings in order to be creative and, like Soledad, Richie, a young and talented musician also from the Heights, feels that he needs to leave the neighbourhood in order to pursue his career (208-9). In the same way, Soledad begins her own journey away from her community by leaving home in order to attend the prestigious Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. In an interview, Cruz highlights Soledad’s courage because

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 122.

she knows very well that her choice to be an artist means that her “family might never accept her because she’s not choosing a job that would help the family or serve as a move to a higher class.”¹⁹⁵ This does not necessarily indicate a rejection of artistic inclinations: for example, Gorda praises Soledad’s talent as a painter (“you have a very powerful imagination, Soledad. It makes sense, you’re a painter. I’m sure every thought, every word, is like a potential painting to you” (196)) but the novel exposes the resistance which Dominican American artists, particularly female artists, can face from their families because of the perception of the impractical nature of any such career. Soledad remembers her mother’s view that the life of New York is a life of work: “in New York,” Soledad says of her family, “they don’t live, they work, until we go home” (219). Yet, Soledad does not intend ‘to work until she drops’ and then go ‘home’ to the Dominican Republic; she rather wants to create an artistic career for herself in New York City. All of Soledad’s family members are low-paid workers: her uncle works in goods delivery, while Doña Sosa works as a seamstress: despite the fact that these jobs are badly rewarded they are seen as fitting within the communities’ framework in contrast with Soledad’s artistic aspirations.

Second-generation Dominican Americans, moreover, have a further duty to be ‘practical’ because they have a better chance of accessing good jobs because of their education: Soledad, for example, has the language skills which qualify her for a job as a receptionist, allowing her to make potentially vital contacts in the art world. The novel reveals the importance of having a “classy job”, as in the following conversation between Soledad and Flaca, Soledad’s fourteen-year-old cousin:

Classy Soledad is working at a galleria. Do you have to wear a suit?

No.

What kind of classy job you got that they don’t even make you wear a suit. They probably have you in a basement, licking stamps and shit (31).

Flaca belittles Soledad’s job as a receptionist at the art gallery, deeming it to be without value since it does not require the “suit” that is seen as a necessary requirement for ‘senior’ positions. Flaca’s words, however, also testify to the tendency to dismiss those who left the neighbourhood that was prevalent in Washington Heights in the late 1980s and early 1990s and which was based on the belief that such departures were a family and community betrayal. Cruz explains that she herself felt betrayed and angered by those who left Washington Heights: “I remember the stoop,

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 121.

sitting on the stoop and seeing others leave the neighborhood and thinking they were sell-outs. I remember the anger I had because they left, because they left me behind, or just because they were leaving and I wondered why? Who do you think you are?"¹⁹⁶ In the novel this resentment is epitomised by the character of Flaca, particularly because after Soledad's departure, Flaca's freedom of movement is further restricted by her family.

While Soledad wants to explore her opportunities in New York City, in fact, her family feels threatened by the cultural influence of the wider American society which exists outside Washington Heights. For instance, Soledad thinks about inviting her best friend and flatmate in East Village, Caramel, a Texan of Mexican origin, to the family house. However, Soledad quickly decides against this course of action because she can foresee her family's reaction to Caramel.

Behind her back they will yell at me because of her pierced nose and the tattoo around her ankle, as if I were the one who came home wearing them. They'll say.... Tell me who you hang out with and I'll tell you who you are. They will lament over what happens to girls when they go downtown with all those locas Americanzadas [Crazy Americanised Girls]. They will hold on to Flaca even tighter, with more fear that she will fall from grace and get corrupted (89).

The first-generation of migrants depicted in *Soledad*, in fact, stand as the protectors of old traditions brought with them from their old country. Gorda and Olivia see the community of Washington Heights, to some extent, as a safe place to perpetuate Dominican traditions while they perceive the culture of the rest of New York as separate, 'foreign' and destabilising to the Dominican-American community. The geographical location of Washington Heights, in the northern reaches of Manhattan, heightens this sense of distance, in that it contributes "to isolate it from the mainstream New York City life."¹⁹⁷

The only reason why her relatives are prepared to tolerate (reluctantly) Soledad's departure from Washington Heights is the thought that she will enjoy a better life in material terms. John Logan and Wenquan Zhang have indicated that "there are [...] affluent sections within Washington Heights," but "on average, moving up means moving out for Dominicans in New

¹⁹⁶ Sobeira Latorre, "Shifting Borders: An Interview with Angie Cruz," *Latino Studies* v. 5, no.4 (2007): 480-1.

¹⁹⁷ Suzan J. Dicker, "Dominican Americans in Washington Heights, New York: Languages and Culture in a Transnational Community," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* v. 9, no. 6 (2007), 715.

York.”¹⁹⁸ Initially, Soledad herself believes that by moving to another area in New York, she has a chance of being admitted into higher social classes. Ironically, Soledad’s move to East Village fails to provide her with the better life she is hoping to attain: the building she lives in “looks like an accident waiting to happen” (29) and she describes her new neighbourhood as grim:

Everything about it, the smell of piss, the halls as wide as my hips, the lightbulb in the lobby that flashes on and off like a cheap disco light, reminds me of my deception. But if [my family] knew the truth, (and how much I am paying for it), they’d declare me insane (1).

Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez conclude that Soledad’s lies to her family are “literal narratives of utopic upward mobility” that fail to reflect the reality of Soledad’s living conditions.¹⁹⁹ At the same time, Soledad also lies to most of the people she knows and works with outside Washington Heights because, in the East Village, she feels that if she reveals her roots in the Dominican Republic she will be despised by American society in general. As a result, she seeks to obscure her origins: when her colleagues at work ask her about where she used to live, she “vaguely” mentions the “Upper West Side” (2) of Manhattan, consciously trying to create the illusion that she is from one of the more popular white areas in Manhattan, like those close to “Italian restaurants and Central Park where a lot of New Yorkers go” (2). By hiding her background, Soledad tries to detach herself from the stigma that surrounded her neighbourhood in the 1980s and 1990s, striving to distance herself from a place which had a reputation for being full of criminals and corrupt police.

Soledad wants to believe that she has gained an entrée to the artistic community because of her job as a receptionist in an art gallery but when Caramel visits the gallery, she points out that Soledad does not really belong to this place: “when was the last time you saw a Latina artist in a gallery?” (56). Carmel’s comments highlight the uneasy relation between race politics and arts:

¹⁹⁸ John R. Logan and Wenquan Zhang, “Cubans and Dominicans, Is There a Latino Experience in the United States,” in *The Caribbean Migration to Western Europe and the United: Essays on Incorporation, Identity, and Citizenship*, ed. Margarita Cervantes-Rodríguez, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Eric Mielants, Ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 203.

¹⁹⁹ Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, “Movin’ On Up and Out Lowercase Latino/a Realism in the Works of Junot Díaz and Angie Cruz,” in *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-sixties Literature* (New York: Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91.

We, my dear, will end up like Frida Kahlo, paralyzed in some bed in perpetual pain waiting for our deaths to sell our paintings for a million dollars, while some young rich jerk will wear torn jeans, drip paints on the canvas as if he was some kid in preschool and make a fortune by the age of thirty because critics will say he had the courage to regress (56).

Carmel further excoriates the exclusive nature of the institutional arts which fail to welcome people of colour: “can you really see your abuelita [grandmother] or Gorda walking into this uptight gallery without feeling completely out of place?” (58). Carmel points out that by just being in the gallery with Soledad she may have raised suspicions: “I’ll go now,” she says “God forbid they see two spics in here, they might just start hiding their pocketbooks” (58). Soledad, however, becomes defensive and states that if her employers were racists, why would they have given her a job in the first place? Carmel’s view is that her friend has secured the job thanks to her degree from Cooper Union and her fairer skin (58). Overall, the novel makes it clear that Soledad is isolated in the art gallery: not only her job as a receptionist does not really fulfil her dream as an artist but she also suppresses crucial parts of herself to satisfy her employer: “I know the owner of the gallery doesn’t like that I’m an artist. That’s why I hide it from her. She feels artists have agendas. I don’t let my employees be in my shows, she says” (83). This rule, however, only applies to Soledad because the owner “represents her niece and her friend’s daughter, and her lover’s mother exhibits quite a bit,” Soledad adds, “but of course that’s different” (83). Soledad also longs to be invited to an outing with the rest of the people who work there: “that’s what they do at the art gallery, they all go out to their houses in the Hamptons or they have friends who invite them. I haven’t been invited. I’ve already planned what clothes I would take with me when that happens” (64). Such a trip would signify Soledad’s acceptance into the elite community of the art gallery, but the invitation never comes as she is firmly kept on the margins of the artistic community to which she desperately wants to belong.

Echoing Díaz and Pérez, Cruz insists that the artist’s alienation from the art scene starts from school years. Cruz recalls how the educational system in the United States was focused on famous texts written by “white dead men.”²⁰⁰ Cruz also states that it was not until she had the chance to read African-American Literature at Binghamton University, aged twenty-one, that she believed she could become a writer.²⁰¹ It is this unwelcoming environment which Cruz recreates in the novel, painting a vivid picture of what awaited the artist of colour of her generation. As a

²⁰⁰ Interview with Latorre, 478.

²⁰¹ Interview with Latorre, 478.

result of her canonical education, Soledad's idea of what constitutes an artist is strictly conventional, in that she expects to follow the model of travelling to Europe as part of a latter-day 'grand tour.' She believes, in fact, that to become a true artist, she needs a "once-in-a-lifetime apprenticeship" in Spain which she is forced to renounce when her mother's medical conditions worsen: her aspirations reveal her lack of an original concept of her own way forward as an artist, thinking of the trip to Europe as the only way to fully develop her skills. Ironically, while Soledad is looking for inspiration in European culture, one can clearly see the influence that her distinct Dominican background has on her art: according to her teachers, in fact, Soledad's paintings display "an interesting relationship to clutter" (8). This "clutter" signposts her family: "my family is like clutter in many ways. They gather in piles, hard to get rid of no matter how much I try" (8-9). On another occasion in the novel, Soledad describes more precisely how her talent is influenced by her family: "[my family] remind me of my crowded paintings," Soledad recounts, "no matter how big I stretch the canvas, I never have enough room for all my ideas" (9).

It seems that by adopting socially acceptable 'norms' of what an artist should be, Soledad does not acknowledge how important creative parts of herself can be related to her family, and, by extension, to her childhood roots in the Dominican-American community and in the Dominican Republic. Soledad's negative perception of the Dominican Republic, is seen to be affected by the fact that her mother often sent her back 'home' during her early years and often threatened to send her there as punishment for bad behaviour: "I [Soledad] remember how every time I stepped out of line my mother threatened to send me home. Home República Dominicana home" (218-9). Many years later Soledad still has nightmares about those childhood visits to the Dominican Republic: "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" (127). Richie, however, encourages her to deal with her oppressed feelings:

Maybe you should take a trip there so the nightmares will stop.

No way. Before I go to D.R. I'd go to Europe.

To do what?

To see the world.

Europe is not the world.

Dominican Republic isn't either.

But it's a big part of your imagination. And that's your world (127).

Soledad's efforts to become part of an elite group of artists distance her further from her origins: after two years away, she feels like an outsider on her return to Washington Heights. On her train journey back to care for her mother, she feels "left behind" by the "white folks" when they get off the train at 59th Street, making "the little hairs on the back of her neck jump up" (2). Once she gets off at Washington Heights, she is immediately annoyed by what she sees:

As soon as I arrive at 164th Street I'm *attacked* [My italics]. I trip on the uneven sidewalk. The air conditioners spit at me. The smell of onion and cilantro sting my eyes. I start to sneeze, the humidity is thick [...] Merengue blares out of car speakers, the Dominican flag drapes in place of curtains on apartment windows, sneakers hang from lampposts [...] pizza boxes and old issues of *El Diario* burst out of the trash cans (3).

Soledad clearly feels uneasy with the Dominican aspects of the neighbourhood and feels "attacked" by Dominican culture to which she reacts almost as if it were 'alien' to her: she complains about the smell of the food, the sound of the music, the presence of the Dominican Republic flag, the pride of the people in their own language.²⁰² It is clear that Soledad's negative feelings towards Washington Heights are also exacerbated and complicated by the attitude displayed by her family towards the neighbourhood in their conceptualisation of 'home':

Every time my mother says home she means San Pedro de Macorís, and my grandmother means Juan Dolio, where her parents, my great-grandparents, still live. It is clear that my grandmother's home in Washington Heights is temporary, until they make enough money to return home. Victor and Gorda also call [the Dominican Republic] home (218-9).

Once back in Washington Heights, Soledad also feels the need to proclaim her status as a 'Dominican'. For instance, Soledad complains: "Gorda translates every [Spanish] word as if I don't understand. As if my first words weren't in Spanish" (13). Yet despite being offended by

²⁰² Duany thus describes the elements which identify the Dominican-American community: "many Dominican residents of Washington Heights display their identity by [...] placing national flags and maps on the walls, and playing loud *merengues* and *bachatas*." *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, 59.

her aunt for 'excluding' her, Soledad tends, in turn, to prevent her fourteen-year-old cousin Flaca from reclaiming her Dominican origins: unlike Gorda, both Soledad and Flaca were born in the United States but when Flaca decides to wear a T-shirt which reads "Dominicans go all out," Soledad engages with her in a sterile struggle over authenticity and claims that she is more Dominican than her younger cousin because she spent so much of her childhood in the Dominican Republic: "and what is that T-shirt supposed to mean? You haven't even been to D.R." to which Flaca answers, "I'm still Dominican" (32). While Soledad seems to waver between different identities which she feels unable to reconcile, the novel offers as foils characters who are more comfortable with their hybrid identities. Soledad feels envious of Caramel's confidence in being a Latina in the American society: "I wish I grow up to be like [Caramel]. With so much strength, comfortable in her own skin, not caring what anyone thinks" (91). Likewise, Richie, an artist like Soledad, is unapologetic about his Dominican origins: his flat is "filled with souvenirs from Dominican Republic, paintings of the markets and beaches in oranges, blues, greens" (97).

The end of the novel stages a reconciliation between Soledad and her country of origin and a resolution which heavily depends on Soledad's artistic nature and a belief in folk religion. Soledad, in fact, finally discovers the reasons underlying her mother's condition when, by accident, she finds three tins in her mother's flat that contain Olivia's personal pictures and other items. In one of the tins, she finds a list which has names and descriptions of the men Olivia had sexual encounters with when she was a sex worker. Upon reading the list out loud, the old and naked ghosts of these men, including Manolo, manifest themselves to Soledad in her mother's flat; when Soledad informs Gorda about the presence of these ghosts, the aunt expresses her belief in Soledad's artistic talent and supernatural powers: "I think that somehow you have trapped these men between your imagination and the physical world" (196). The appearance of these ghosts prompts Soledad to help her mother get better by following the advice given by her family back on the island: when Olivia's other sister Cristina advises Soledad to bring her mother back to the Dominican Republic for a ritual of cleansing, the two women embark on this journey together. Once in the Dominican Republic, the ritual begins with mother and daughter revisiting the places where Olivia lived and worked as a sex worker; then they travel to a sacred river where they must destroy the list of Olivia's former clients and throw in the water the pictures of all the family members, including those of Olivia and Soledad (206).

Upon her arrival in the Dominican Republic, Soledad takes the same critical, disenchanted and dismissive attitude to the country that she had in the past taken to Washington Heights: “as I walk into the airport, I can bite into the humid air. It’s so thick and smells like wet soil and rum. We survive the luggage inspectors, getting through their thorough search without having to bribe them” (213-4). When she arrives at her aunt Cristina’s house, Soledad realises the degree to which remittances, gifts and parcels with second-hand items sent from Dominican Americans to their relatives back home seem to have made a real difference in the lives of those who have stayed behind in the Dominican Republic: around the house she recognises things that previously belonged to her and appreciates the fact that the house is in a good condition and “with a working toilet” thanks to her family’s contributions: all this makes her feel more at “ease” there (214). Nevertheless, her status as a Dominican American seems to distance Soledad from her extended family in the Dominican Republic where she feels like an ‘important guest’ who can make their lives better if they treat her properly rather than as a member of the family: while Soledad belongs to the working class in the United States, she realises that just by being born and raised in the United States she is perceived as someone who has, as Dalleo and Sáez put it, a “relatively privileged position”²⁰³ in the Dominican Republic:

They will [...] make the kids who share that bed climb onto another crowded bed without any air-conditioning and fans, just so I, la gringa who is used to las cosas Americana [American stuff], will feel comfortable, be able to sleep alone and hopefully grant their favors (207).

As noted above, Olivia and Soledad’s journey retracing the past ends at a sacred river. There, they board a raft to reach the point where the cleansing ceremony can take place. The rower of the raft warns them against reaching over the side to touch the water because, while it looks shallow, it is actually very deep. He also tells them a story of a “gringo turista” (222) who saw a gold necklace at the bottom, jumped into the water and disappeared while the image of the necklace remained. The disappearance of the American tourist in her pursuit for gold, could be read as a reference to colonialism and neo-colonialism and the different ways in which, historically, the United States has exerted military, political and economic control over the Dominican Republic in the name of profit, an aspect Cruz has discussed in more details in *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005), the novel which will be analysed in the following chapter. In this case, however, the rower tells this story to Soledad because he thinks that, due to her light skin she

²⁰³ Dalleo and Sáez, 97.

must be a stranger and another “gringa turista”. Soledad, in fact, recounts her grandmother’s comments when she was a child in the Dominican Republic, “Soledad, you and that gringo blood, mosquitoes find you everywhere”(220). While, supposedly, none of Olivia’s family members knew about her past as a sex-worker, the novel suggests that Doña Sosa must have guessed something about her daughter’s past when she saw Soledad’s skin colour and assumed that Soledad was not Manolo’s daughter but possibly half- white-American or European.

The cleansing process allows Olivia to reconcile with her past, but it also helps Soledad to rethink her attitude towards herself, and her family, as well as Washington Heights and the Dominican Republic. When they reach the right spot, mother and daughter, accompanied by Cristina, Olivia’s other sister, and her husband, Bienvenido, perform the cleansing ritual, with Olivia burning the list and throwing it into the water and then throwing the photos of family members into the river as well. As Cristina explains, “the photographs of those that need to be cleansed from all the trappings in life will dip and then float. When we see them float we will know they will be ok,” but if they don’t float, “it’s not good” (223). All of the family pictures float except for Soledad’s. Even though she does not believe that the ritual can decide her future, she still throws herself into the water in order to retrieve her photograph, and, as a result, she comes close to drowning. However, in her near-death experience, Soledad discovers that she does not feel afraid; on the contrary, she feels as if she is at one with the water: “I’m not drowning [...] I can breathe through my pores” (226). As she is under water, the “photograph flips over” and she sees a “window to another world” (227). This window reveals her neighbourhood of Washington Heights and simultaneously she remembers Richie’s and Gorda’s advice, namely “see the world”, and “you have to learn to just be” (227). When Soledad hears her mother shouting her name she realises that she is in danger of drowning and quickly gets out of the water, significantly surviving the experience, unlike the “gringo turista.” The water clearly stands as a symbol of cleansing and a new beginning, but it can also be interpreted as a sign that Soledad’s ability to survive is dependent on her acceptance of her Dominican heritage or, as Dalleo and Sáez suggest, on her awakening to the fact that she in some way belongs to “the Caribbean waters.”²⁰⁴ I would argue, however, that whilst she is submerged in the water, Soledad sees Washington Heights, a fact that also indicates her final acceptance of her complex Dominican-American background. It is not clear if Soledad wants to go back permanently to the neighbourhood but mother and daughter are reconciled: they share some memories of the birth of Soledad and discuss her mother’s wish not to be alone again. As Soledad accepts the Dominican

²⁰⁴ Dalleo and Sáez, 98.

Republic and Washington Heights as part of who she is, the reconciliation with her mother occurs naturally, for she is the living link between Soledad and her various existences and experiences.

At the end of the novel, therefore, Soledad embraces the culture of Washington Heights, finally matching Cruz's own positive feelings towards the same neighbourhood and the Dominican-American culture it encapsulates. Unlike the Dominican-born Alvarez, Pérez, and Díaz, Cruz was born and raised in Washington Heights — but, interestingly, she insists on the fact that she was conceived in the Dominican Republic²⁰⁵ — and, even if she does not “want to go around saying [that she is] a Dominican writer because if [she goes] to the Dominican Republic [she is still] a foreigner,” she highlights that the Dominican Republic provides her with a place for mental and physical escape when the hardship of life in the United States becomes overwhelming²⁰⁶ and that she has a strong connection with the place:

Even if I wasn't born there, I do have a real engagement with the Dominican Republic, with my family there. I travel there over four times a year. That is a lot more than many of my friends who were born in the Dominican Republic and lived there for two years and never went back and they're accepted as “Dominican writers” because they were born there. And I think that this is the problem with the label.²⁰⁷

Cruz, therefore, places herself within the lineage of recent Dominican American writers inaugurated somehow by Alvarez with *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in 1991 (ten years before Cruz's *Soledad*). As Cruz herself points out, there was a lot of “pressure” on those who first appeared as the voices of the diaspora and she is aware that Alvarez had to establish herself as a Latina and, more precisely Dominican American writer in a white-dominated literary establishment.²⁰⁸ In interviews, Cruz has acknowledged the changes wrought in the art scene in the United States since Alvarez wrote her novel and celebrates the fact that there are now more writers from the Dominican diaspora (and other diasporas) who have established themselves and continue to emerge.²⁰⁹ Cruz still believes that Dominican American writers and artists often feel as if they were outsiders not only in the United States but also in the Dominican Republic but she recognises that Dominican diasporic writers are now more celebrated in the Dominican Republic

²⁰⁵ Interview with Latorre, 486.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 126.

²⁰⁷ Interview with Latorre, 486.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 118.

²⁰⁹ Interview with Latorre, 482.

than when Alvarez published her first book – a publication which, as we have seen in chapter one, received a lot of criticism in the country of origin for her fictionalisation of her Dominican background²¹⁰— and suggests that this re-evaluation of the diasporic writer is due to the role the diaspora in the United States plays in supporting, mainly financially, the Dominicans in the Dominican Republic.²¹¹

Arguably, in *Soledad*, Cruz posits the Dominican American artist as someone who struggles to reconcile three worlds together, the Dominican Republic, New York/the United States, and the Dominican-American community of Washington Heights. Art, for Cruz, is built on personal experiences and is further enriched by the culture and heritage of the community it addresses.²¹² I would argue that the tension between Soledad as an artist and her Dominican background is used by Cruz to highlight her belief in the need for writers to find creative ways to bridge the gap between the artist and his/her community whilst allowing her or him to question disabling internal structures and dynamics of her/his community: the status of the artist as an outsider, in fact, creates the distance required to form a critique of that community but also to recognise its potentiality as a source of art further enhancing his/her creativity. This creativity, moreover, is then channelled towards making enabling changes in the community itself and, in the process, transforming a given community's notion of what constitutes 'home,' and encouraging its acceptance of the hybridity and heterogeneity that the experience of migration brings with itself. In the fifth and final chapter of my thesis, I will further question received notions of home building, national identification or Dominicanness, racial and ethnic homogeneity, and cultural impermeability with Cruz's second novel *Let It Rain Coffee*. Here the author chooses an elderly Dominican American of Chinese origins to be the protagonist and investigates more closely the deep and long standing exploitative relation between the United States and the Dominican Republic.

²¹⁰ Interview with Latorre, 482.

²¹¹ Interview with Latorre, 482.

²¹² Interview with Torres-Saillant, 2003, 125.

Chapter Five

Embracing Difference:

Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005)²¹³

In chapter four of my thesis, I highlighted how Angie Cruz insists on the decisive role that an outsider female artist can play in identifying obstacles to the ongoing negotiations between the value of tradition and the necessity of change which, according to Torres-Saillant, characterise the Dominican-American condition. In this chapter, I will examine Cruz's second novel *Let It Rain Coffee*²¹⁴ where Cruz concerns herself with excoriating the United States' neo-colonial approach to the Dominican Republic and with countering racial, ethnic and cultural stereotypes which in their turn have led to the social exclusion of migrants both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States.

Let It Rain Coffee narrates the story of the Colóns, a Dominican family whose lives change when Esperanza, an ordinary housewife decides that she wants to migrate to the United States. At the outset of the novel in 1981, Esperanza plans to leave the Dominican Republic for Puerto Rico, with the intention of crossing into the United States. Her plan is inspired by the American Dream as depicted by the popular television soap opera *Dallas* (1978–1991), which explores the lives of the Texan Ewing family, whose vast wealth stems from an oil company. Her husband, Santo, is against the plan to emigrate and so she is forced, over the period of a few months, to prepare for her journey in secret. Gradually saving money, Esperanza finds, at the age of thirty, that she can afford the first step of her dream – the trip to Puerto Rico. When she sets out, Esperanza leaves behind her three-year-old son with her parents-in-law Don Chan and Doña Caridad. Santo, finding out that his pregnant wife has escaped, determines to follow her and applies for a visa for the United States. Meanwhile, Esperanza gives birth to a baby girl in Puerto Rico. Later, when she runs out of money, she works as a housekeeper for a Puerto Rican family until Santo gets his visa to move to the United States. Eventually, he finds a job as a taxi driver in New York and reunites his wife and two children in Washington Heights.

²¹³ An earlier version of this chapter is published as an article in *Label Me Latina/o* entitled “The Shared History of the United States and the Dominican Republic in Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee*.” The article's main focus is on how *Let It Rain Coffee* presents the diasporic Dominican community in Washington Heights within the broader context of the United States and the Dominican Republic political and economic relations and invites us to understand the intertwined relationship between the two countries. Rasha Al Shalabi. *Label Me Latina/o* v. 5 (Fall 2015) <<http://labelmelatin.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-Shared-History-of-the-United-States-and-the-Dominican-Republic-in-Angie-Cruz-Let-It-Rain-Coffee.pdf>> (accessed 31 December 2015).

²¹⁴ Angie Cruz, *Let It Rain Coffee* (NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005). Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses in the text.

The novel's central narrative takes up the story in 1991, ten years after Esperanza's escape from the Dominican Republic, at the point when Dona Caridad dies in the rural outback of Los Llanos, marking the end of her seventy-year marriage to Don Chan. With no one to take care of him, and the difficulty of receiving medical assistance in the middle of the Dominican countryside, Santo decides to invite his elderly father to live with them in Washington Heights. Don Chan accepts the invitation and joins Santo and Esperanza and their thirteen-year-old son Bobby and ten-year-old daughter Dallas. One year later, Santo is murdered in his cab. Esperanza, now solely responsible for her two children and her father-in-law, works as a full-time care-worker to provide for the family. Esperanza's long absences prevent her from supervising her children as they approach their teenage years. Problems at home multiply as her daughter misses school, her son is sent to Spofford Juvenile Detention centre, and her elderly father-in-law suffers increasingly from dementia. Despite all this, Esperanza still believes that her American Dream will one day be fulfilled.

The novel comprises eight chapters which are separated by asterisks indicating the shifts in narrative focus between the different characters. Cruz's 'return' to Washington Heights, the same setting of her novel *Soledad*, is no longer characterised by the foregrounding of an 'alter-ego' Soledad—the most prominent narrator in her first novel—and by a complex analysis of Cruz's own specific, individual, relationship with the neighbourhood. *Let It Rain Coffee* is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator in the third-person voice which has the effect of distancing the reader from the characters' personal experiences, and allowing the narrative to focus on the broader social problems which faced a Dominican family in the United States during the 1990s. We are also able to appreciate the troubled shared history of the United States and the Dominican Republic and contemplate alternative notions of 'Dominicanness'. The narration covers the period between 1991 and 1999, that is the years which date Don Chan's departure from Los Llanos in the Dominican Republic up to his eventual return to the home he left behind. The novel further employs flashbacks to present four specific episodes from the past. One of these covers the period between 1916 and 1922 and tells the story of Don Chan as a child in the small seaside Dominican village of Juan Dolio during the 1916-1924 United States occupation of the Dominican Republic. Two other flashbacks focus on the years between 1961 and 1966, and describe the lives of Don Chan, Santo and Miraluz – Santo's girlfriend at the time – in the rural community of Los Llanos, and their role as political activists during the troubled aftermath of the assassination of president Trujillo (1961), the subsequent civil war and the second occupation of 1965-1966. Finally, the novel covers the time immediately before

Esperanza and Santo's arrival in New York in 1981 –ten years before Don Chan's migration– and describes Esperanza's frustration with her life in Los Llanos, her migration to Puerto Rico, and Santo's decision to go to the United States and secure a valid visa for the rest of his family.

The narration shuffles freely between these five time periods. Juanita Heredia points out that “the dispersal of memory in the narrative has as much an effect on the displacement of the reader as it does on the actual characters.”²¹⁵ This ‘dispersal of memory’ also finds a counterpart in Don Chan's scattered memory, which deteriorates with the onset of Alzheimer's disease, and makes him confuse his experience as a migrant in Washington Heights with the period between (1965-66) which coincides with the United States occupation of the Dominican Republic. For instance, at one point he mistakes a white-American police officer in Washington Heights for one of the marines who was stationed in Los Llanos in 1965. This episode also allows Cruz to contrast the experiences of Don Chan and his grandson:

[Don Chan] saw the police officer walking his beat on Quepasó Street and sucked his teeth. What right did they have to invade his country?

–Those Yanquis never get enough.

–So you saw how the Mets beat the hell out of those Yankees last game, Abuelo? (120).

For Don Chan, for whom the past is at times more vivid than the present, the word ‘Yankees/Yanquis’ signifies a US marine, while Bobby identifies the term as the name of the Yankees baseball team. Interestingly, however, baseball has become the Dominican national sport as a result of the United States occupation of 1916-24 and so Don Chan's memories and flashbacks enable Cruz to highlight how the present is a result of the past in implicit as well as explicit ways.

Cruz's choice of an elderly character allows her to touch upon key events in the recent history of the Dominican Republic which help her investigate the degree to which American influences have played a crucial role in the development of the Dominican Republic. The United States' influence, as portrayed in the novel, is seen as pernicious during both its periods of occupation. During the first occupation, the young Trujillo was able to train with the US Marines, and joined the National Guard created by the occupying military force in

²¹⁵ Juanita Heredia, “Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005): A Diasporic Response to Multiracial Dominican Migrations,” in *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-first Century: The politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 91.

1924, using “the US-designed security forces to construct a dictatorship, removing opposition and consolidating his personal power.”²¹⁶ At the same time, the government of the United States consolidated its control over the resources and politics of the Dominican Republic during the period of dictatorship. This period is portrayed as a very bleak one for the characters in the narrative, and the nation in general.

The death of president Trujillo led to the second occupation of (1965-6) as the country entered a period of political chaos caused by the conflicts between Loyalists (previously Trujillo’s supporters) and the opposition. In February 1963, Juan Bosch, who returned to the country after twenty-three years in exile, was elected as a president, only to be overthrown by a military coup seven months later. On 24 April 1965, pro-Bosch militants, who called themselves Constitutionnalists, staged a coup to restore Bosch’s presidency. Loyalists pressed the US embassy in Santo Domingo to call for an American military intervention, labelling the coup a “communist plot.”²¹⁷ The effort to bring American troops to the Dominican Republic played on fears in Washington that communism might spread to the Dominican Republic from Cuba and, despite insubstantial evidence of ‘communist’ participation, the United States announced that it would intervene militarily and released a list of “alleged communists” within the pro-Bosch military forces.²¹⁸ Eventually, forty-two thousand American soldiers landed in Republic’s capital in April, 1965, “under the pretext of saving lives and protecting U.S. interests in the country.”²¹⁹ Moya Pons has highlighted the direct connection between the US military landing and the eruption of the civil war: “the first U.S. marines landed on April 28, 1965 and sided with the Trujilloist army. Santo Domingo was rapidly divided into two zones occupied by the opposing armies [...] Hence, what began as a coup d’état [by Bosch’s supporters in the army] ended as a civil war.”²²⁰ Through Don Chan’s scattered memories, we are told about the violence committed by the United States forces against civilians during the occupation of 1965, as described in a past-edition of *Patria* journal headline: “The Yanquis Came to ‘Save Lives’ Civilians Assassinated by the Gringo gun on June 15 and 16 in the Tragic Massacre of Santo Domingo” (175). This headline refers to the way the United States

²¹⁶ James Ferguson, *Beyond the Lighthouse* (London: Latin American Bureau Ltd, 1992), 23.

²¹⁷ Atkins and Wilson, 134.

²¹⁸ Ferguson states that “In order to justify the exercise, a list of 58 alleged communists involved in the constitutionalist forces was released by the US authorities; many of these, journalists discovered, were dead, out of the country or simply innocent of the charge. Nonetheless, the State Department remained adamant that it had acted to forestall a communist takeover and civil war.”, 29. Also Atkins and Wilson report that “A number of analysts found little credible evidence supporting the fear of a “second Cuba” resulting from victory by the Constitutionnalists and other supporters of Juan Bosch.”, 136.

²¹⁹ Moya Pons, 338.

²²⁰ Moya Pons, 388.

forces attempted to eradicate the opposition by “bombarding” the centre of Santo Domingo “with heavy guns” for thirty-six hours.²²¹ Overall, the civil war casualties were estimated to total 2,000 for Bosch’s supporters, civilians and army militants in comparison to 825 amongst Trujilloist’s armed forces and police.²²² The Constitutionalist claimed that they were robbed of success by the United States intervention which shifted power back to the Loyalists and resulted in the dispersal of Bosch’s supporters and the announcement of new elections. In July, 1966, Joaquín Antonio Balaguer Ricardo, a previous member of Trujillo’s regime endorsed by the US government, was elected as president. In her novel, Cruz returns to this crucial episode in the Dominican Republic’s history in order to reject explicitly the United States government’s claims that its actions were prompted by the need to protect civilians and implement democracy. Don Chan, in fact, comments sarcastically on the legitimacy of the occupation: “why don’t the Yanquis let us figure it out for ourselves? It’s hardly democratic for the U.S. to impose democracy on another country!” (173).

Don Chan, an orphan of Chinese origin, is Cruz’s chosen witness to these crucial political events, starting with the years of his childhood and continuing until he returns to the Dominican Republic after his experience of migration to Washington Heights. The author is, therefore, able to highlight matters of race and ethnicity, key elements of the Dominican national discourse, which began with the establishment of the nation in the nineteenth century and which became particularly prominent during the first United States occupation (1916-1924). Don Chan enters the narrative when he is found on the beaches of the village of Juan Dolio in 1916 at the age of six. Don José, Caridad’s father, decides to adopt the child after giving up an attempt to trace his parents. Many people in Juan Dolio speculate on the origins of this Chinese-looking little boy: “travelling workers explained to Don José that Little Chan looked like the Chinos from Panamá. – Cuba, hombre. – You’re a Chino from Cuba, said another. – There’re a whole bunch of Chinos in Jamaica. That’s where you’re from. They had shiploads heading to Jamaica to work the cane” (96). During the years of the United States occupation of 1916-1924, however, an increasing number of Chinese settled in the Dominican Republic.²²³ The United States facilitated the entrance of Chinese migrants to the Dominican Republic to join the many Haitians who were also ‘imported’ to work in Dominican

²²¹ Piero Gleijeses, “Hope Denied: The US Defeat of the 1965 Revolt in the Dominican Republic”, (working paper, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, The Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, 2014), 40.

²²² Atkins and Wilson, 146.

²²³ Edith Wen-Chu Chen, “‘You are Like us. You Eat Plátanos’ Chinese Dominicans, Race, Ethnicity, and Identity,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* v. 27, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 23-4.

plantations during the occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916 to 1924) and of Haiti (1915 to 1934), most of which were controlled by the United States: notably, in 1924, when the United States withdrew from Dominican territory, American corporations owned 11 out of the 21 sugar mills operating in the country and 98 % of its sugar exports were absorbed by the United States' market.²²⁴ The Dominican sugar industry, which was developed during the first United States occupation, was later appropriated by Trujillo, who continued to rely on cheap Haitian and Chinese labour to run the industry.

The novel illuminates some of the historical circumstances surrounding the arrival of Chinese people in the Dominican Republic and exposes the difficult life conditions of Chinese labourers in the country in the early twentieth century. As Don José develops a protective instinct towards little Chan, he is horrified when –on a trip to the capital– a man approaches him to buy the boy. The man tells Don José: “I had a China boy myself and he died. It was not the best investment I made, he only worked for me for six years. You see, the China boys have a special skill for work, and they’re not lazy or cause trouble like the Haitians” (100). The novel further suggests that Chinese labourers were imported to replace some of the Haitian work force in the Dominican Republic, because they had fairer skin than the Haitians. Edith Wen-Chu Chen explains that during Trujillo’s rule, Dominicans tried “to minimize the Africanness of their country” and “Asian immigrants, along with Europeans, were included in the solution for elevating the Dominican race.”²²⁵ Following the incident in Santo Domingo, Don José moves Chan and the rest of the family out of Juan Dolio in order to settle in secluded Los Llanos as he cannot trust the people who live in Juan Dolio because he thinks they might kidnap and sell little Chan because of their extreme poverty. Los Llanos, in contrast, offers some security due to its being almost uninhabited at that time, a result of having been attacked by United States forces in retaliation for its resistance to their first occupation. Don José’s decision to protect the little boy might be related to the fact that he is of Haitian origin and the anonymous narrator describes how the neighbours observed Don José with little Chan and “whispered about the odd couple, a dark, tall man and a small Chinese boy” (98). Through the characters of Don Chan and Don José, Cruz seeks to investigate essentialising discourses on the nature of Dominicaness. Despite his origins, as we will see, Don Chan clearly considers himself a Dominican rather than a “China” boy or man.

The choice of an orphan child allows Cruz to create a character whose loyalty lies only with the place and culture in which he grows up. Don Chan, in fact, is deeply committed to his

²²⁴ Ferguson, 17.

²²⁵ Chen, 27.

adopted country and Marisel Moreno goes as far as describing him as “the embodiment of Dominicaness.”²²⁶ Cruz here continues with her investigation of the complexity of the concept of ‘home’ – an idea she first sought to explore in *Soledad*, where she asked whether it is the place people simply come from, the place they grow up in, or the place they choose, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Moreover, by bringing together Don José and little Chan, Cruz shows the difficulty of associating Dominicans with one single race or ethnicity whilst pointing to the possibility of a pacific coexistence between different ethnicities and races.²²⁷ At the same time, Cruz also points out how the United States expects the Latin Caribbean migrant to conform to a precise stereotype: upon his arrival in New York, the airport police officer feels “confused” (6) by Don Chan’s Chinese looks and his Dominican passport. The novel, therefore, indirectly challenges the tendency of mainstream Americans to stereotype minorities and categorise them on the basis of specific characteristics or racial features: in a broader context, Pessar has highlighted how, in the United States, dark-skinned Dominican Americans often face discrimination because of their colour. A dark-skinned Dominican interviewed by Pessar, for example, explains how, in a job interview, she was told that she did not ‘look’ Hispanic.²²⁸

Significantly, Don Chan’s sense of national pride is seen to develop most noticeably after the period of Trujillo’s dictatorship, when he becomes a political activist. He forms a group called the Invisible Ones which agitates for the economic independence of Los Llanos, and which encourages people to vote for Bosch in the elections of 1963. The Invisible Ones spread around the country under the secret leadership of Don Chan. Initially, Don Chan and his group succeed in distributing the lands of Los Llanos fairly among those who work in the fields. Los Llanos begins to develop into a financially independent place on the basis of the income from local mining for gold and precious stones, and the decision to withhold farming products for the use of the local community. The collapse of the dictatorship, as portrayed in the novel, however, leads to the rise of smaller power groups that take advantage of the poor and Don Chan’s dream of local independence during Bosch’s short term presidency ends in disappointment, as he has “to admit that full bellies made the Invisible Ones as indifferent to the injustices of the world as the rich whom he often criticised” (65). The “optimism” and hope which accompanied

²²⁶ Marisel Moreno, “Dominican Dreams: Diasporic Identity in Angi Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee*,” *Quisqueya: La República Extended. Spec. Issue of Sargasso: A Journal of Caribbean Language, Literature, and Culture* .II (2008): 109.

²²⁷ Heredia comments on this point: “The idea of building new communities across biological lines and national backgrounds points to a new form of making social alliances in the Dominican diaspora generation, which had begun with the great-grandfather, Don Julio [sic], a person of Haitian descent and the African diaspora, who took in a little Asian (Chinese) boy and named him Don Chan”, 106.

²²⁸ Pessar, 43.

democratic freedom end with the collapse of Bosch's presidency (63). After the occupation and the civil war, Balaguer's government disperses the Invisible Ones and threatens Don Chan, forcing him to stop his political agitation. The 1970s witnessed an increase in national income, thanks to the establishment of industries such as textiles, agricultural products, and a flourishing tourist sector.²²⁹ This boom, however, was built on high-interest debts, as Balaguer's government relied on loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, underwritten by the United States government.²³⁰ Cruz here suggests that the failure of this more equalitarian project and the economic recession of the 1980s are strictly linked and, together, prompted an upturn in emigration. By 1981-1982 "the Dominican Republic was in the midst of a severe economic crisis"²³¹ and, as a result, the number of Dominican migrants leaving for the United States was almost double the total number of the previous decade.²³² It is in this context that Esperanza makes the decision to migrate, particularly because, born in the capital city of Santo Domingo, she finds life hard in rural Los Llanos, a village plagued by water shortages and electricity blackouts. Unable to return home to Santo Domingo because her father had never approved of her marriage, she can find hope only in the fictional lives of the Ewings in *Dallas*.

Influenced by the media, primarily TV which she watches avidly, Esperanza believes in the superiority of American culture and dreams of living there: her desire to emigrate and her admiration for the values of the United States relate to what Atkins and Larman call "Northamericanization", a term they use to describe the cultural influence of the United States on the Dominican Republic during Balaguer's three presidential periods (1960-62, 1966-1978 and 1986-1996), and particularly the second.²³³ They identify "Northamericanization" as "the impact of not only U.S. goods but also cultural values by way of radio, television, and motion pictures."²³⁴ As anticipated, such influences on the Dominican Republic grew sharply after the first United States occupation: Moya Pons notes that during these years "U.S. games and toys became popular, and baseball eventually replaced cockfighting as the national sport"²³⁵ and also adds that after the United States forces left the Dominican Republic "more than half of the

²²⁹ Michael J. Kryzanek, and Howard J. Wiarda, "The Dominican Economy: The Constant Struggle for Growth and Independence," in *The Politics of External Influence in the Dominican Republic* (California: Praeger Publishers, 1988), 135.

²³⁰ Kryzanek and Wiarda, 128-9.

²³¹ Kryzanek and Wiarda, 139.

²³² Duany, *Blurred Borders*, 56-7. The number of documented Dominican migrants counted up to 141,578 between 1970 and 1979, while it reached 226,853 for the following decade. The years between 1990 and 1999, witnessed the peak of Dominican migration. The number of documented migrants during these years counted up to 356,545.

²³³ Atkins and Larman, 150.

²³⁴ Atkins and Larman, 157.

²³⁵ Moya Pons, 338.

country's imports continued to come from the United States."²³⁶ During the years of Trujillo's rule, the influence of the United States was evident among the Dominican elites: in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, for example, the wealthy and affluent grandparents travel to New York regularly and buy American toys for their four granddaughters during the dictatorship. After the second United States occupation of the Dominican Republic, however, "Northamericanization" increased dramatically also in other sector of society, especially because of the growing number of Dominican migrants who adapted to life in the United States and who, indirectly, introduced some elements of the American culture to their country of origin via clothes and gifts sent back home to relatives.²³⁷ Post-1966, the technical control which the United States had over Dominican media outlets increased the visibility of American products and lifestyles: according to Atkins and Larman "television relied on U.S. commercials promoting U.S. products, and the movies [...] portrayed the lifestyles, values, and material goods of the highly developed, prosperous, and secularized U.S. society."²³⁸ Pessar argues that "despite economic downturns in New York, the visual images of life in the United States that Dominicans on the island receive[d] via cable and advertising remain[ed] a strong inducements to migrate."²³⁹ *Let It Rain Coffee* highlights the role the United States has played in encouraging emigration from the Dominican Republic by way of such 'Northamericanisation' by stressing how Esperanza's decision to go to the United States is prompted by her exposure to the soap opera *Dallas*, which is focused on the daily lives of the Ewings, an extremely wealthy upper-class family. The influence of the TV series is vividly illustrated when Esperanza names her daughter after the show. Once in New York, Esperanza continues to be an easy prey for the US media, which encourages the belief that upward social mobility within society is not only possible, but likely.

In the hope of living her American Dream, Esperanza unconsciously suppresses the economic and social reality of her position as a Dominican migrant; she focusses on her initial success in gaining entry to the country, regardless of her immediate surroundings: "back then she didn't see the buildings as gray, or the city as grimy; or mind the crowds of people sitting on the front stoops catching a cold on a sunny day" (9). Ignoring obvious signs of lack of social mobility within the migrant community, Esperanza continues to believe that she will one day achieve the prosperity denied to so many other Dominican Americans. Cruz, through the narrator, tells the reader that Esperanza "didn't think twice about [...] the fact that the streets had

²³⁶ Moya Pons, 338.

²³⁷ Atkins and Larman, 157.

²³⁸ Atkins and Larman, 160.

²³⁹ Pessar, 40.

the smell of an impossible dream” (9). After all, for her “New York City had always been Nueva York—an oasis of opportunity” (9). Esperanza tries to create the illusion of wealth by buying commodities which she sees advertised on TV, using her credit card. Unable to pay back what quickly becomes a huge debt, Esperanza is compelled to work even longer hours to pay off what she owes in monthly instalments; a task which she estimates will take her twenty years. Cruz’s novel, therefore, highlights how the idea that migration and wealth are inevitably linked is promoted by the media both in the Dominican Republic and the United States.

In contrast, Don Chan ridicules the American life style even before he arrives in the United States. His vision of New York’s socio-political hierarchy is exemplified by his mocking of that vertical city’s famous buildings: “he knew the world was built in such a way that some got to piss in toilets high above everyone else while the less privileged sat at home thinking the piss was rain” (5). Cruz’s depiction of Don Chan’s attitude towards the United States, while humorous, also prompts the reader to sympathise with his situation as he is driven to leave his homeland in old age only to relocate in a small flat in a crowded neighbourhood in Washington Heights. It is not surprising that, overall, Esperanza and Don Chan have starkly different attitudes towards the United States and their condition as migrants. Esperanza, as we have seen, is the one who initiated the family’s migration, and, despite the disappointing reality of their adopted country she has to face such reality every day: despite this she is still desperate to convince herself that just ‘being’ in New York is, in itself, an achievement. Don Chan, on the other hand, leaves the Dominican Republic reluctantly and only because, after his wife’s death, it was no longer safe for the old man to live on his own; however, he never ceases to dream of a return ‘home’ and, most importantly, never wavers in his optimism for the future of the Dominican Republic and the possibilities which lie ahead for its people despite the negative influence which the United States continues to exercise on the country. Don Chan, for example, openly criticises the United States-based coffee-chain Starbucks because it sells coffee at a high profit margin while Dominican coffee farmers are paid cheap wages in the Dominican Republic:

Don Chan sneered straight at the woman holding a bag from Starbucks.

—Don’t look at me like I’m crazy when you paid four dollars for café con leche. That’s crazy. People back home make four dollars a day. You should give the money to someone who needs it (158).

The title of the book, which is inspired by a song sung by Juan Luis Guerra, a famous Dominican singer, describes how, if it would rain coffee, then Dominicans could sell it and fulfil their basic needs. Cruz invites us to reflect on a situation in which the United States dominates the Dominican economy by controlling the prices of coffee and sugar, while taking advantage of the farmers' need to provide for their families. In *A Cafecito Story: El Cuento del Cafecito* (2001),²⁴⁰ Julia Alvarez also tackles the issue of the automation of the coffee industry, which resulted in the production of large quantities of coffee regardless of quality, and criticises the capitalisation of the coffee industry in the Dominican Republic, as it leads ultimately to farmers losing their land and their jobs. While it takes a farmer three years to grow good quality coffee beans, land farmed using mechanical methods produces the same amount in a single year while reducing the quality. Since most farmers in the Dominican Republic have to compete with large corporations, and many lose their businesses as a result, the non-fictional epilogue to *A Cafecito Story* invites readers to support free trade coffee as a way of opposing the increasing commercialisation of the industry, and to help the farmers produce good coffee, while at the same time supporting their families.

Predictably, Don Chan's arrival in New York exposes Esperanza's insecurities about her predicament as a migrant. Cruz repeatedly illustrates the extent to which Esperanza escapes the reality of Washington Heights to create the illusion of success even though she is well aware of the underlying realities of her predicament. As Don Chan arrives for the first time in the building where his son's family lives, Esperanza unsuccessfully tries to hide the reality of their poor living conditions: "Esperanza distracted Don Chan's attention away from the cigarette butts pushed up against the walls and the graffiti in the lobby. She hurried Don Chan along to escape the smell of pot and piss in the elevator" (11). When Don Chan complains about the dirt – "Doesn't anyone clean here?" – Esperanza privately dismisses his criticism: "he went from pissing in the dirt, with a house with no roof and he's complaining" (11). In contrast, however, Don Chan's house in the Dominican Republic is described as "in complete order: the cement floors freshly mopped, the wood for the kitchen stove piled up neatly into a small pyramid" (2). While Don Chan finds pride in the home he inherited from his family, Esperanza is in fact ashamed of the way she and other Dominicans live in Washington Heights and seems to have interiorised the way in which the newly-arrived migrants were perceived by other diasporic groups of Latin-American origins who were already resident in Washington Heights and looked down on Dominicans. Cruz highlights the hostility some Dominicans felt upon their arrival in the

²⁴⁰ Julia Alvarez. *A Cafecito Story: El Cuento del Cafecito* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2001).

United States, and also the inner tensions that existed in the neighbourhood in the 1980s: for example, Esperanza hears a Cuban lady who has a children's clothing store repeatedly complain about the newly-arrived Dominicans: "these Dominicans," she kept saying "are making a mess around here" (9). Esperanza, we are told, wants to live in the Jewish section of the neighbourhood because their buildings are in better conditions than those of the Dominicans:

For years, she had wanted to move farther north of Quepasó Street, where the Jewish families lived. Around los Judíos is very decente, Esperanza thought. Unlike us Dominicans who aren't decentes, we're so loud, we can't get off the streets. We want to make people deaf with all that merengue. Jewish people work hard and go school. That's why they don't like when *we* move into their buildings (108).

While Esperanza uses the pronoun 'we', she clearly seeks to differentiate herself from the rest of the Dominicans and her reflections and aspirations suggest an assumption of superiority on her part. Cruz, I suggest, is attempting to highlight the fact that the Dominicans of Washington Heights are not a homogenous group, that different people react to their conditions in different ways, and that one such response is denial. After having invested a lot in her American Dream, Esperanza appears unable to accept the reality of her life which is, in fact, a life in a poor Dominican neighbourhood: she needs to feel that she is different from other Dominicans because she still needs to dream that one day she will leave the Dominican community behind and make a success of her life in the city beyond Washington Heights.

Barriers to social mobility, however, are clearly signposted in the novel which also highlights the condition of African-Americans who had been living in the neighbourhood long before the arrival of the Dominicans and "had survived the sixties only to find that their children still couldn't get a decent education" (9). Through Don Chan's eyes, the reader can clearly see how the United States fails to provide any chance also for Dominican Americans to thrive: even though the Cólons have been living for ten years in New York prior to Don Chan's arrival, they only own the taxi that Santo uses for work and continue to live in a small rented flat. Moreover, the anti-social hours they need to work to support themselves damage family life. At the beginning of the novel, Santo and Esperanza work alternatively and their work patterns widen the gulf between them: "it was easy for them to stay angry at each other, when Santo worked nights and Esperanza worked days. If they stayed on schedule, they could spend weeks without having to talk much at all" (47). Don Chan criticises the workload his own family has to endure:

“you want to live to work or work to live? From what I can see, both of you live to work. What’s the point to live at all?” (48). Esperanza again dismisses Don Chan’s criticism, this time by stressing their need to work to support those who are back home. “How else would you have survived in that campo without us sending checks back home every month?” (48). Santo tries to consider both Don Chan and Esperanza’s points of view about both countries, but is particularly susceptible to Don Chan’s nostalgic and hopeful stories about the simple life back in the Dominican Republic. While driving home one night, Santo is robbed and murdered and the thief escapes with his watch, his only expensive possession and a gift from his father. The narrator tells us that in the months before being killed, Santo wanted to return to the Dominican Republic with his family, at least for a short while, as he felt desperate because he had spent all his time working for the future and was unable to live in the present and enjoy his life: “everything about Nueva York was about tomorrow. He wanted it to be about today” (72). The novel here explores the recurrent migrant’s dream of returning ‘home’ which, in the case of Santo, is cruelly denied him by the murderer’s attack. The death of Santo is a blow to the family, and their living conditions deteriorate as Esperanza becomes the sole breadwinner for herself, the two children, and her father-in-law. Don Chan feels that he is a burden on the family because he is unable to work because of his old age but after Santo’s death, Esperanza and Don Chan’s relationship becomes one of co-dependency: being a working mother, she needs Don Chan to take care of her children when she has night shifts and Don Chan needs Esperanza to take care of him in his old age.

In 1994, just after Santos death, Esperanza gets a job in the Bronx as a care-worker for Mr. Hernández, an elderly Cuban who claims to be divorced and alone. She soon discovers that Mr. Hernández’s wife lives with him and has manipulated the benefits system to acquire social support and free healthcare for her husband by falsifying his records to indicate that he is divorced. As a matter of fact, at that time Dominican migrants to the United States often found themselves working for non-Dominican Latinos who had a longer history in the country, were more acquainted with the United States benefits system, and used their knowledge to their advantage. The presence of Mrs. Hernández transforms the situation for Esperanza, who had been expecting to be a care-worker for an incapacitated lonely old man, rather than a home-help for his wife. Initially, she is unhappy at the prospect of being a *trabajadora* [a kind of servant] for the family, a job that she finds demeaning: “if [she] had wanted to be a *trabajadora* she would’ve stayed in Dominican Republic” (109). However, since she needs a job to support her family and pay back her huge debts, she decides to stay and work for the Hernández couple. In

her first conversation with Mrs. Hernández, Esperanza tries to present herself as a success story to her employer, praising herself for having achieved her dream of living in the United States, an ambition conceived while watching *Dallas* back in the Dominican Republic. When Mrs. Hernández replies sceptically, “but Dallas is a long ways from here” Esperanza answers “so was Nueva York and look at me now” (110). She then proceeds to quote the words of *Dallas*’s lead character: “Jock Ewing said that any man can win when things go his way, *it’s the man who overcomes adversity who is the true champion*” (110; italics in the text). At the end of the conversation, however, Esperanza is reminded of her subaltern position when her new employer asks her to make a cup of coffee. “Esperanza was taken back. She wondered if she would even be allowed to have some. Back home, las trabajadoras weren’t allowed to drink from the same cups as their employers. What if she didn’t make the coffee, would she lose her job?” (111-2). While she treats Esperanza as a maid, however, Mrs. Hernández has to work all the time herself at the twenty-four-hour Laundromat down the block (112). Overall, in fact, the Hernándezs do not live in much better conditions than Esperanza, yet the lady of the house orders Esperanza to do tasks which are not strictly related to her job description. Cruz here illustrates the tensions which can exist within the working classes, focusing specifically on the hierarchical order which places more established groups above new arrivals when they become employers themselves and mimic the manners of the middle classes.

As in *Soledad* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the long hours worked by parents also influence negatively the mothers’ relationships with their daughters: as for Beli and Lola and Olivia and Soledad, Dallas and Esperanza’s conversations are limited to discussing household tasks: “she wanted to be closer to her mother. But it was never the right time to talk with her. Her mother was always telling her what to do, giving her chores” (190). These chores are related to the fact that Dallas is expected to fulfil her role as a Dominican daughter: though she works outside of their home just like her husband and feels she has the power to take familial decisions, Esperanza still expects Dallas to help her with the kitchen chores while, in contrast, she encourages Bobby to study. Before Santo passes away, he and Esperanza raise their children very differently, allocating to them different roles, in accordance with their gender. For instance, Santo teaches Dallas how to dance and how to resist seduction if a man asks her out (59) but when the thirteen-year-old Bobby is attacked by a school-gang who steals his jacket and shoes, Santo reacts to the robbery as if it is his son’s fault for not being able to defend himself. Somewhat ironically, since during the civil war in his country of origin Santo managed to avoid any fighting, he lectures Bobby about manhood, teaching him how to fight back. Bobby,

however, refuses to follow his father's model and the tension in the father-son relationship over this and other issues suggests that, as Heredia puts it, "Cruz complicates the meaning of masculinity."²⁴¹ It is also clear from the narrative that while the long hours of work required of Dominican migrants just to survive in New York result in more responsibilities being delegated to their children, parents, consequently, end up losing some of their own traditional authority. Dallas and Bobby, moreover, resent each other because they are treated differently and each of them looks at the advantages which the other has based on gender: Dallas is envious because her brother does not do work inside the house and she craves the freedom he has outside but Bobby feels upset when his mother expects him to find a job and become the man of the house after his father's death.

After Santos' death Esperanza becomes a single working mother like Beli and Olivia: whether the husband disappears as in Díaz's novel, is murdered by his wife as in *Soledad*, or is killed by a stranger as in *Let It Rain Coffee*, the three mothers strive to embody both matriarchal and patriarchal authority. Like Beli and Olivia, who attempt to control their daughters Lola and Soledad, Esperanza threatens to send Dallas to the Dominican Republic as a punishment – a common theme in Dominican-American narratives, as we have seen previously. Dallas's perception of the country of her origin is based entirely on what she has heard from her mother, as Esperanza explains, life in the Dominican Republic means to have "to live without a TV, a CD player or new clothes" (211-2). Clearly, the younger Dominican Americans' expectations – based on a higher standard of living – are mostly rooted in the capitalistic United States culture, where material possessions are seen as a necessity. Esperanza also uses ruthless threats to try and intimidate Dallas: "I made you and I can destroy you if I feel like it, even if it means I have to go to prison my entire life. You won't disrespect me again" (215). Esperanza justifies her threats as a way of protecting her daughter: "if she allowed Dallas to do what she pleased, Esperanza would lose her. Like all the other girls she saw getting pregnant, messing up their lives" (214). Esperanza's fears are mostly obvious when we witness the sixteen-year-old Dallas venturing outside the neighbourhood and being exposed to sexual exploitation in the city. When Dallas is looking for a job, she approaches a young man called Peter who works in a CD shop. "He looked like a white boy. Maybe he could hook me up with a job, she thought" (198). Dallas, falsely promised a job by Peter, accepts his invitation to his flat. There, Peter expresses his fascination with Dallas's skin colour "I love the color of your skin, and passed his pale hand on her belly" (209). He treats her as 'exotic' because of her looks, and this makes her feel uncomfortable and

²⁴¹ Heredia, 100.

when Dallas refuses to sleep with him, he retaliates by asking her to leave his house breaking his promise of finding her a job. Cruz here is seeking to uncover some of the racial prejudices that exist within the American mainstream community and which result in the exoticisation of female migrants.

The novel also shows us how the second generation of Dominican migrants to the United States is able to challenge the authority of parents, utilising the advantage of being born and raised in the host country. For instance, Dallas is empowered by her ability to speak better English than her mother. In contrast, Esperanza uses Spanish to discipline her daughter. Dallas notices that “the pitch of [Esperanza’s] 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). Dallas tends to respond in English, taking advantage of her mother’s inability to comprehend the language perfectly: “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). This aside reveals Dallas’s anger towards her mother, and the extent to which Esperanza’s dream of a new life in the United States has been reduced to working as a servant. But her inability to understand English also reveals her alienation from American society and the fact that her dream of integration has not been fully realised. Significantly, when Esperanza is informed of Santo’s death, we are told that she “only screamed in Spanish, because that night, she didn’t have the energy to translate herself. No one understood her pain” (80).

Earlier in the novel, the Dominican-born Esperanza wonders if being born in the United States would have given her a better chance to thrive: “if she had been born in the States, would she have been an actress like Rita Hayworth or Raquel Welch? But she would’ve changed her name, maybe into Hope Saint or Saint Hope. Something American sounding” (182). Yet, the novel suggests, even the second-generation Dominican Americans, who were born and grew up in the United States, do not have the same opportunities as their white-Americans peers because of the widespread existence of prejudice. Cruz illustrates the consequences of such prejudice when the fifteen-year-old Bobby is involved in a shooting incident. A white boy called Arnold brings a gun into the neighbourhood which belongs to his father, a retired cop, and allows other boys, including Bobby, to hold the weapon. When Bobby hears his sister, attacked by a mugger, shouting for help, he runs to her rescue, with the gun he was carrying in his hands at the time. When the mugger sees that Bobby has a gun, he points his own gun at Dallas. At this point, Mrs. Schoberth, an old German lady who has

stumbled on the scene, begins screaming for the police. In a panic, Bobby waves the gun at her because her screams prevent him from thinking clearly and then fires at the thief who was still threatening his sister, injuring him in the leg. The police, arriving at the scene, take Bobby away to Spofford Juvenile Detention centre where he is not given a proper hearing and is instead accused of threatening Mrs. Schoberth and also of stealing the gun thanks to a story concocted by Arnold in the hope of protecting himself. Arnold, being the son of a white police officer, is believed without question and so is Mrs. Schoberth when she accuses Bobby while Bobby, who denies these false accusations, is denied a court hearing and incarcerated in the detention centre for three years despite the fact that Dallas supports his version of the facts and Esperanza testifies that her son was at home when the alleged theft of the gun took place.

Overall, detention is a mixed experience for Bobby. On one hand, he cannot escape discrimination even in the detention centre, for he is harassed by other detainees who insult him because he is Dominican: “*Off-the-boat, Plátano-sucking motherfucker, what is your problem?*” (137, italics in the text). In other words, in an environment where all the youngsters are condemned by society, Bobby is doubly-condemned by other detainees because of his Dominican origins. On the other hand, during his imprisonment, he learns how to use computers, laying the foundation for future job opportunities; moreover, this period of separation from Washington Heights offers Bobby the opportunity to appreciate, when he returns, the extent to which his neighbourhood has been further demonised. Hush, Dallas’s school friend, explains to Bobby the degree to which the police presence has increased during his time in the detention centre: “it’s gotten pretty bad since you were last here. It’s called Operation Clean-up. The cops are everywhere, undercover” (204). In the 1990s, in fact, Washington Heights progressively gained the reputation of being full of Dominican drug dealers — a reputation which was based solely on the activities of a few members of the neighbourhood — and young Dominican Americans were routinely harassed by the police.²⁴² For example, Pessar recalls an incident which happened in the mid-1990s when “a Dominican man was choked and suffocated to death by a policeman. The victim had been playing basketball with his family, when he was charged with disturbing the peace and resisting arrest.”²⁴³ Moreover, the increase in the number of illegal Dominican migrants during this period in Washington Heights led to a corresponding rise in the presence of the immigration police. Many Dominicans who were afraid of deportation tried to keep off the streets. Pessar reports that “there [was] the potential for harassment by and run-ins with the police and agents of the feared Immigration and Naturalization Service” and because

²⁴² Pessar, 26.

²⁴³ Pessar, 80.

Dominicans were targeted by the police, many avoided particular streets in Washington Heights, or chose to stay at home after dark.²⁴⁴

Cruz's denunciation of the criminalisation of the Dominican-American community of Washington Heights in the 1990s goes hand in hand with her indictment of the systematic exploitation of its inhabitants. After living for eighteen years in the United States, Esperanza has to face the fact that she is not making any progress. Elina Valovirta, Lydia Kokkola and Janne Korkka highlight Esperanza's ability to provide for a family in New York on single wages, seeing it as an achievement which, they insist, "cannot be considered a life of failure. Yet," they add, "from her own perspective, Esperanza fails in the US."²⁴⁵ Heredia suggests that Esperanza has unrealistic expectations and "fails to acknowledge the racial and social discrepancies between the immigrant Dominican Colón family and the privileged Anglo-American Ewing family in *Dallas*"²⁴⁶ but it is worth noting that her own simple ambition is to become a *housekeeper* in a household like theirs rather than to be like the Ewings' themselves: "she imagined herself working for a rich family. Just like Raul and Teresa, the Ewings' housekeepers" (14). Moreno argues that this limited ambition reflects the restricted concept of success held within the immigrant community and explains that this calls into question the definition of success in both the home and host societies, demonstrating, to some degree, that Esperanza has an understanding of the class restrictions which stand in her way.²⁴⁷ Esperanza's feelings of disappointment are exacerbated when, on the train in 1999, she actually runs into Patrick Duffy, the actor who plays the role of Bobby Ewing in *Dallas* (248). When Esperanza asks about his life in Dallas, Duffy dismisses her as being delusional and explains that he actually lives in California, not Texas at all. Hence, Esperanza's dream of a good life in Dallas is destabilised by this sudden realisation that one of the principal characters in her favourite TV drama is merely an actor, with a real life very different from that of his character. This meeting shocks Esperanza, and causes her to swing wildly between reality and imagination in her own mind but as Duffy leaves the train, Esperanza regrets not asking for the actor's autograph, revealing that at some level she accepts the fictional basis of the drama.

Shortly after the meeting with Patrick Duffy, Esperanza finally decides to visit the Dominican Republic along with her children and Don Chan. Her decision to return, however, is

²⁴⁴ Pessar, 80-1.

²⁴⁵ Elina Valovirta, Lydia Kokkola and Janne Korkka, "The Smell of an Impossible Dream: *Dallas*, Migration, and Creative Failure in Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* v. 49, no. 229 (2014): 240.

²⁴⁶ Heredia, 99.

²⁴⁷ Moreno, 106-7.

not completely derived from despair at her life in the United States but also from her wish to validate, in some way, her original decision to emigrate, and in particular to demonstrate to her children that she did the right thing: Esperanza “was glad that her children would see that things here weren’t as great as Don Chan had made them out to be [...] her children would see what she saved them from” (269). At this point in the narrative, Cruz examines the different ways in which Dominicans returning from New York and those who stayed home perceive each other. Despite the fact that her return to the Dominican Republic was at least partly prompted by her sense of failure, when she is in Santo Domingo, Esperanza looks down upon the locals, accusing them of all being “thieves” (267) and, for her own part, attempts to take the moral high ground. She tells her daughter: “don’t take your eyes off the luggage. Give them a chance and they’ll steal your clothes right off of your body” (267). Like Beli in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Esperanza acts as if she belonged to a higher class because she lives in the United States: she “had a different air about her. From the moment they landed, [she] was bossing everyone around and complaining” (268). The tension between Dominicans and returning Dominican Americans is palpable on both sides as those arriving from the United States are sometimes seen as a source of corruption and often treated as outsiders in their mother country. On their road trip from the airport to Esperanza’s family house in Santo Domingo, the taxi driver criticises the frequent deportation of Dominican Americans back to the Dominican Republic: “the U.S. turns our people into criminals and then sends them back to us so we have to suffer the consequences” (268). According to Moreno, the prejudice against Dominican Americans in their country of origin contributes “to their exclusion and marginalization, despite the significant role that this group continues to play in the Dominican Republic’s economic, political, and cultural spheres” while Pessar underlines that “the Dominican diaspora in the United States and the Dominican Republic has been frequently misunderstood [...] by members of the dominant society on both shores.”²⁴⁸ While Dominican Americans play an important role in both countries, they find themselves continuously having to redefine their relationships with the Dominican-American community in the United States, American mainstream society, and members of their families in the Dominican Republic. Esperanza, in fact, feels criticised by her extended family when she has to justify the fact that in New York they do not live in a house but in a flat and tries to ignore the many questions they ask about Santo’s murder and the story that Bobby has been in “jail” (281); but she finally collapses into tears when her family forces her to face certain aspects of her life as

²⁴⁸ Moreno, 102; Pessar, 86.

a migrant in the United States and to acknowledge that she has not fulfilled the family's expectations of living in full the American Dream.

The family's return to the Dominican Republic also exposes the continuing exploitation of Dominican resources by American corporations. Before Don Chan finally returns to Los Llanos after ten years of absence in New York City, he decides to take a trip to Juan Dolio, to introduce Bobby to the place where he was found as a child. When they reach the beach, to his surprise, Don Chan is faced with an armed man who tells him that, unless he has a pass to the hotel, he is not allowed on the beach. Through the eyes of Bobby, the narrator describes Juan Dolio as a tourist destination: "Bobby looked to the hotel strip, the wall that separated him from Don Chan's home, and realized the place was far from where Don Chan had grown up. It was the home of tourists, not what Don Chan had described" (273). In fact, Juan Dolio, previously a fishing village, became an important tourist attraction in the late 1980s, partially because of its closeness to Las Américas International Airport. Infrastructure was largely constructed to serve American tourists, a development supported by Balaguar's policies; the building programme was sponsored by World Bank loans and the government invited foreign investors, mainly Americans, to invest in the tourist industry.²⁴⁹ Amalia L. Cabezas argues that the tourism industry has "allowed the United States to maintain and extend its economic dominance of the region" and explains that such dominance is not limited to "foreign investments" but extends to other forms of control exercised through the supply of technology which serves the tourism sector, such as airplanes and ticketing systems.²⁵⁰ The Dominican tourism industry is also characterised, as it is common across the Caribbean region, by privatised beaches closed to local people.²⁵¹ The beach where Don Chan was found, as we have seen, has now been privatised and as a result, he is not allowed to go there anymore.

The novel also examines the increasing economic influence of the United States exerted through the Free Trade Zones (FTZ) established to serve Washington's needs during the 1980s and 1990s. Cruz depicts the continued exploitation of Dominicans by US corporations and the extent of its control over the Dominican economy through the story of Miraluz, Don Chan's former co-activist, who suffers from the illegal working conditions imposed within the FTZs. When Don Chan returns to his home country, he finds Miraluz involved in a fight against factory owners who take advantage of local workers. Heredia argues that "Cruz creates this female

²⁴⁹ Amalia L. Cabezas, *Economics of Desire Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 40.

²⁵⁰ Cabezas, 31-2.

²⁵¹ Cabezas, 29.

activist character to demonstrate that women contributed to social change in their own way.”²⁵² It could be suggested, therefore, that the novel underlines that changes in the traditional Dominican male-female power structure are not only a product of migration to the United States but can also develop within the Dominican Republic itself. FTZs, like the one in which Miraluz works, started in the 1960s when major US corporations transferred “several of their own manufacturing subsidiaries to La Romana” – a city in the South-East of the Republic, and then acquired other sites in San Pedro and Santiago.²⁵³ The FTZs were mainly created for the United States corporate enterprises which wanted to export sugar and coffee. With the decrease of United States demand for Dominican sugar in the 1970s, Balaguer established more FTZs which “sought to attract foreign private investment, especially from the United States,” because FTZs enjoyed certain tax-free benefits and are able to exploit cheap labour.²⁵⁴ In the late 1980s, the FTZs became very popular with non-traditional sectors of Dominican industry (mainly garments and agricultural products other than coffee or sugar).²⁵⁵ One of the challenges which faced Dominicans in FTZs, as Cruz points out in her novel, is that the role of trade unions was severely minimised as high rates of unemployment allowed factory managers to keep wages low, thanks to the threat of unemployment: according to Laura T. Raynolds, in the 1990s, “unions in the free zones represented a small percentage of workers and were largely inactive.”²⁵⁶ In *Let It Rain Coffee*, Cruz thus describes the exploitation of workers in the FTZs factories: “the overseer yelling, Rápido, rápido. Women squeezing balls of fabric in between their legs, while they trembled because they were afraid to ask for permission to go again to the bathroom” (223). Miraluz, who works in a factory which manufactures underwear for Victoria’s Secret, a United States-based chain, starts a labour union to protect her fellow female workers within the company; in response, the factory owners terrorise Miraluz by sending gangs to beat her children. Miraluz then challenges the system in the FTZs by convincing some co-female-workers to start their own cooperative underwear factory, which is partly financed by remittances sent to the organisers by their relatives in the United States.

²⁵² Heredia, 95.

²⁵³ Andrew Schrank, “Export Processing Zones in the Dominican Republic: Schools or Stopgaps?,” *World Development* v. 36, no. 8 (2008): 1381-1397, 1388.

²⁵⁴ Atkins and Larman, 151.

²⁵⁵ Jean-Marie Burgaud and Thomas Farole, “When Trade Preferences and Tax Breaks Are No Longer Enough: The Challenge of Adjustment in the Dominican Republic’s Free Zones,” in *Special economic zones: progress, emerging challenges, and future directions*, ed. Thomas Farole and Gokhan Akinci (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2011), 163.

²⁵⁶ Laura T. Raynolds, “Harnessing Women’s Work: Restructuring Agricultural and Industrial Labor Forces in the Dominican Republic,” *Economic Geography* v. 74, no. 2 (April 1998), 154.

Initially, the novel appears to present Miraluz and Esperanza as conflicting characters, pitching Miraluz's activism against Esperanza's individualism. For example, Valovirta, Kokkola and Korkka suggest that Cruz "contrasts Miraluz's successful business with Esperanza's debt."²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the novel also underlines how both characters strive to support Dominican society and invites us to appreciate the extent to which the Dominican Republic's economy benefits from the skills and expertise of Dominican Americans as a whole. The most obvious contribution Esperanza makes, like most Dominican Americans, is sending money, goods and consumer products to family members. In the novel, it is precisely thanks to these remittances that the co-op factory funded by Miraluz can prosper. Also, skills learnt in the United States, for example in relation to technology, can be communicated back the Dominican Republic via returning migrants. A case in point is that of Bobby, who helps Miraluz to set up a shopping webpage to sell the new factory products to Dominican Americans. As a result, by highlighting the role they play in their country of origin, Cruz seems to gesture towards a different notion of 'Dominicanness,' one which includes Dominicans who live abroad or who, like Don Chan, were born elsewhere; a notion which accepts and celebrates its heterogeneity.

Cruz resorts to a form of magical realism to end the novel as Don Chan's strong connection to what he considers his homeland and its long history of exploitation is illustrated by his decision to end his life by finally disappearing into a field of sugarcane:

Don Chan's hands dug into the earth. And as he dug, the earth cracked open and he fell into it, catching glimpses of women nursing their sons; men running, shooting, [...] As he fell deeper into the earth, he saw women killing their children in rivers and crying; people making love; hurricanes, tornadoes, rainbows, and blocks of ice drifting in the sea; the insides of people's bodies, sprouting tobacco, sugar, and coffee (289-90).

Sugarcane fields are symbolic of the many injustices perpetrated against slaves and labourers: it is no coincidence, in fact, that in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Beli is raped and Oscar is killed in a sugarcane field. The choice of sugarcane, however, is highly significant also in the context of United States-Dominican relations given its status as a staple crop which benefits the often United States-based owners of Dominican sugarcane plantations — one of the biggest

²⁵⁷ Valovirta, Kokkola and Korkka, 239.

companies is owned by the Florida-based Fanjul family — rather than local labourers who are generally exploited in unacceptable ways.²⁵⁸

Overall, therefore, *Let it Rain Coffee* presents us with a Dominican Republic which, in the late 1990s, still suffered from external interference exerted by the United States over its production, labour force and natural resources but also lays bare the role the United States continues to play in the Dominican Republic: as Cabeza has put it: “the old U.S. interventionist role in Dominican affairs is now played by the multilateral agencies that dictate and control many aspects of national sovereignty.”²⁵⁹ Whilst openly denouncing the United States’ ongoing systemic exploitation of Dominican resources either through direct occupation of the country or through the exploitation of migrants, Cruz’s novel also expands the concept of Dominicaness by foregrounding the interplay of Don Chan’s origins and affiliations and his place in the diaspora in order to undermine simplistic notions of Dominicaness (deployed both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States) and to challenge stereotypes which fuel prejudice and discrimination against migrants in both countries. In this sense, by questioning exclusionary discourses and highlighting the Dominican Americans’ contribution to both the United States and the Dominican Republic, Cruz presents us with a vision of the Dominican-American community which corresponds to Alvarez’s notion of “a country that’s not on the map.”²⁶⁰ Cruz’s novel shows how the Dominican Republic, Dominican-American communities and the wider United States are mapped onto one another in the Dominican-American consciousness also thanks to a long ‘shared’ history which has connected the two countries for a long time. Most importantly, however, *Let it Rain Coffee* echoes all the other novels under scrutiny here by highlighting how, through a “dot in the community”²⁶¹ (for example, a ‘fat nerd’ who questions accepted notions of masculinity, ostracised female writers and artists, a young woman who is the first to be university educated in her family, a Dominican of Chinese descent), Dominican American writers and artists can bring into being (and not only on the page) more inclusive

²⁵⁸ See, for example, Matt Peterson, “American Sugar Policy Leaves a Sour Taste,” *Policy Innovation*, 8 July 2008, <<http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/000136>> (accessed 15 April 2016). See also this report on the predicament of cane-cutters in the Dominican Republic prepared by the United States Department of Labor in 2013, which highlights how labour laws are routinely violated and how *braceros* (mostly of Haitian origins who have been living in the Dominican Republic for decades or were even born in the sugar compounds and consider themselves Dominicans) are forced to live and work in unacceptable conditions. The report is available as “Public Report of Review of U.S. Submission 2011–03 (Dominican Republic),” *Office of Trade and Labor Affairs*, 27 September 2013, <<https://www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/pdf/20130926dr.pdf>> (accessed 1 March 2014).

²⁵⁹ Cabezas, 40.

²⁶⁰ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

²⁶¹ Junot Díaz & Peter Sagal.

communities which transcend geographical, racial, gender, cultural, linguistic, class and ethnic boundaries.

Conclusion

The texts discussed in this thesis present us with four Dominican American authors' understanding of the Dominican diaspora in the United States. Julia Alvarez, Loida Maritza Pérez, Junot Díaz, and Angie Cruz provide an analysis of the social, political, and economic realities of Dominican Americans in the United States, and of their origins within the Dominican Republic prior to their relocation; an approach which allows a multi-layered reading of their texts. This thesis examines the different re-imaginings of the characters' places of experience, which match the precise locations of the authors' upbringing, adulthood, and their migrant families' origins. These places include the two countries in question, urban and rural realities, specific neighbourhoods or communities, but also the family home and other cultural, educational, or religious institutions; in each case, the authors reveal how these locations shaped their individual experiences and intellectual perspectives and they go on to explore what these places represent for their characters. Overall, the narratives examined in my thesis, in fact, present the protagonists' painful search for a place of belonging as they constantly negotiate their identity in relation to the sites and communities in which they operate as well as the pressures and expectations of these sites and communities. The tension between the individuals and their families, their diasporic communities, mainstream American society, Dominican traditions and specific cultural or social groups is palpable in these narratives and invites an evaluation of the strategies that each character adopts in order to live and function.

The authors' choice to set their characters apart from what surrounds them, moreover, allows each writer to emphasise the importance of constant negotiation with contextual realities as their protagonists struggle to understand and map their own individual trajectories, beliefs, interests — or, in a word, identities — along lines of separation and convergence with their (often extended and 'traditional') families or diasporic communities. I have argued in my thesis that these four authors create different scenarios of exclusion in their narratives by endowing their protagonists with distinctive characteristics that set them apart from their families, and, in the case of Díaz and Cruz, the diasporic communities they inhabit or even their community of origin: for example, Don Chan is a Dominican of Chinese origin, Yolanda, Oscar and Yunior are writers, Soledad is an artist, Oscar is a 'nerd' and Iliana is the first educated member of her household. All these characters, in their own way, traverse the lines that delineate zones of belonging or not-belonging and, by focusing on their experiences, the authors fictionalise and investigate their own feelings of separation and alienation from family or community. At the

same time, capitalising on the distance that their alienation presupposes, the authors devise new ways to create and map (through writing) their ‘territory’ or their place of belonging: as Salman Rushdie has put it, “if literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then [the migrants’] distance, [their] long geographical perspective, may provide [them] with such angles.”²⁶² Cruz, for example, specifically identifies her insider/outsider status as an important contribution to her writing career and it is no coincidence that some of the characters analysed here are not only profoundly affected by the experience of migration but are themselves writers (Yolanda, Yuniór and Oscar). At the same time, these texts, which are generated by what Rushdie calls ‘distance’ and ‘long geographical perspective’, clearly demonstrate that, ultimately, ‘home’ is not simply a geographical location; on the contrary, as we have seen, these novels create home(lands) of the mind which are safe spaces or ‘states’ of mind where individual readers who share the same experience of alienation can finally find their own ‘place’.

The five novels in question also allow us to grasp how diversified the Dominican American experience is as the characters which populate these novels differ in terms of class, gender, ambitions, religious belief, generation, level of education, use of language (Spanish, English or ‘Spanglish’), place of upbringing or provenance in the Dominican Republic, place of upbringing and residence in the United States, their degree of acceptance or rejection of Dominican cultural traditions and/or of the American way of life, and the degree of their exclusion or inclusion in the wider social reality of the United States. Furthermore, when featured in the narrative, diasporic communities are also depicted as very complex and diversified realities which can only be perceived as homogenous by those who peer into these places from the outside or have a vested interest in categorising them along simplistic and often derogatory stereotypes.

The Dominican-American experiences depicted in these fictional texts have been mapped spatially and temporally. In a study of this kind, in fact, it is important to acknowledge the shifting perspective of the authors who arrived in, or were born in, the United States at differing points in time during the second half of the twentieth century. Alvarez’s birth in the United States testifies to her privileged status in the Dominican Republic as, at the time, very few Dominicans were allowed to travel and/or move abroad. Alvarez’s family, however, relocated in the Dominican Republic straight after her birth to then move again, permanently, to the United States in 1960 when Julia was ten-years-old. While Alvarez’s migration was motivated by her father’s political opposition to Trujillo, the other authors find themselves in the United States because their families moved there in search of a better life and economic stability: Pérez arrived

²⁶² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands Essays and Criticism* (New York: Granta Books; Penguin Books, 1992), 15.

in 1966 at three years of age, Díaz in 1974 at the age of seven while Cruz was born in Washington Heights in 1972, less than a year after her mother's migration. The different forms of isolation experienced by those who pioneered the Dominican migration to the United States in the 1960s (as depicted by Alvarez and Pérez) or by those who became members of distinctively Dominican-American communities (to be found in the work of Díaz and Cruz) play an important role in our understanding of these novels.

Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* depicts the migration of the Garcías as a change of place, class and status: from their elite status in Santo Domingo to a more modest (but still not destitute) status in New York where they arrive prior to the establishment of a Dominican American community. The Garcías find themselves subsumed under the criticism and prejudice directed towards Latino migrants less fortunate than themselves: as a result, while the author brings to the fore the alienation that she experienced as migrant in the United States, she is also able to revisit her Dominican background and better understand and criticise the discrimination and prejudice which underpinned the social structure of her country of origin. In her second novel *¡YO!*, Alvarez also explores the isolation of the eponymous Dominican American female writer from her family and from Dominican and American societies as she is excluded from the literary scene in the United States for belonging to a minority and harshly criticised in the Dominican Republic for what is deemed to be a 'false' representation of Dominican culture and society.

Similarly, in Pérez's *Geographies of Home*, Iliana feels equally alienated at home and at university as she is discriminated against in both places for different reasons; in addition, like Alvarez's Yolanda, she has no Dominican community she can identify with and draw strength from. Only at the end of a long and tortuous personal trajectory does she realise that she can forge a new individual identity and a new 'home' by embracing empowering aspects of her original culture and her migrant's experience, as well as the enabling possibilities that her life in the United States can offer. The novel also challenges the essentialistic view that identifies all Dominicans as Roman Catholics as it reproduces some of the religious tensions in Dominican society within the family household: while the Seventh Day Adventist father impresses his belief upon the family, the mother is associated instead with the suppressed folk religion of the Dominican Republic.

As we have seen, Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* presents Oscar as an even more extreme case of marginalisation despite the fact that, unlike Iliana or Yolanda he is in a position to identify with a well-established American-Dominican community. Ironically,

however, his bookishness (as we have seen, he both is an avid reader and a writer) and his passion for (white)American geek culture isolates him from his Dominican-American peers in Northern New Jersey, while being of a minority group separates him from the white-American peers that share in his interests. The New Jersey location, moreover, further enhances his ‘peripheral’ status—he lives in a marginalised migrant community in a marginalised part of the United States— but Oscar is also excluded from his family and his Dominican American university colleagues for being unable to embrace the traditional standards of masculinity they have adopted, further rendering him, in their eyes, a figure with a dubious grasp of heterosexuality. The novel, however, suggests that it is precisely the marginalised Oscar who can pave the way towards more inclusive reformulations of identity for Dominican Americans and his experience triggers important changes in many of the characters who revise their position vis-à-vis mainstream American society, reject essentialism, and disabling stereotypes and embrace instead cultural values which can empower them.

If the choice of the ‘peripheral’ New Jersey is crucial to our understanding of Oscar’s predicament, one could argue that the New York Dominican-American community of Washington Heights plays an equally central role in Angie Cruz’s novels *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee*, which include many site specific details about the neighbourhood, such as real street names. Soledad is a female artist whose aspirations create a gap between herself and her family and peers in Washington Heights, her birthplace. Soledad’s attempt to leave her childhood neighbourhood behind, however, only finds her exposed to an alternative exclusion, that of the Dominican-American artist from arts institutions dominated by white Americans: despite having studied supported by a full scholarship, it is clear that Soledad will have to fight very hard in order to find recognition. Here it is a journey back to the Dominican Republic which enables the main character to come to terms with and accept her Dominican heritage, Washington Heights (and what it represents) without renouncing her artistic ambition and the advantages offered to her by being in New York. Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee* takes this further by positing the existence of an extended imagined community that goes beyond territoriality whilst simultaneously challenging the exclusionary and essentialistic nationalist rhetoric of both the Dominican Republic and the United States. She achieves this by focusing on Don Chan, an elderly Dominican migrant of Chinese descent. The ‘imagined community’ the novel outlines and investigates is presented to the readers as a product of the shared history which links the United States and the Dominican Republic. It is also, in its turn, the outcome of United States’ continuous influence on the Caribbean country, which extends from two military occupations in

the twentieth century, the creation of the sugar cane industry, to the establishment of Free Trade Zones. We have also seen the importance to the Dominican Republic of the remittances paid home by migrants, the development of an exploitative tourist industry, the backing of oppressive regimes, and the degree of the technical control over media outlets.

These close interferences also bring to the fore the role played by the labour and resources of the Dominican Republic in the economic success of the United States; whilst raising the question of how long Dominicans have been contributing to the national good of the United States. The authors also reveal the existence of continuity in this respect by highlighting the degree of exploitation of Dominican migrants in the United States. The working conditions of Dominican Americans as depicted in the novels, correspond to, and thus highlight, the historical changes in the economic status of Dominican migrants in the United States. As we have seen, the authors' choices of careers for their characters often reflect the authors' own experiences. As discussed earlier, in the early 1960s, Dominican migration was mainly due to political reasons and was undertaken almost exclusively by educated members of the Dominican elite who occupied white-collar jobs. Alvarez exhibits this in Carlos' career as a doctor and in his ability to move his family home, eventually, to the middle-class district of Queens. It is notable that this is the profession of the author's own father, who migrated to the United States during the same period depicted in the novel, and that the working conditions of the characters depicted by Pérez, Díaz and Cruz are those of their family members. As we move to Pérez's novel, we begin to see the emergence of working-class migrants who began to arrive in the United States during the Dominican civil war. These migrants were mainly skilled workers, as reflected in Pérez's depiction of Papito who finds a job as a leatherworker in the industrial area of 1970s Brooklyn. Díaz and Cruz, in their turn, depict the conditions of low-paid Dominicans who, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were employed in the service and manufacturing sectors as unskilled workers. In *Drown*, Ramón, the narrator's father, works as a forklift operator, while in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Beli, Oscar's mother, contracts cancer from working in a factory within a polluted industrial environment. In *Soledad*, Olivia and her sister Gorda undertake multiple jobs as cleaners and in factories, while Esperanza in *Let It Rain Coffee* works as a caregiver and maid.

Lack of financial security strongly affects the lives of the Dominican Americans featured in these novels, but race too plays a crucial role. I have explained how the authors depict the predicament of Dominican Americans who, coming from a region which does not adopt the 'one drop rule', find themselves in an ambiguous position within the white/black racial dichotomy

established in the United States. As we have seen, some Dominican Americans challenge this binary conceptualisation of race by resorting to adjectives like ‘Latino/a’ and ‘Hispanic’ to identify themselves and how this strategy often masks the racism inherent in dominant Dominican discourses which have traditionally attempted to occlude the African presence and legacy in the country: in *Geographies of Home*, for example, we see how Marina resorts to negative stereotypes to describe African Americans and then rushes to distance herself from them by highlighting her Hispanic heritage. The novels depict how the shift in racial categorisations that derives from the move from the Dominican Republic to the United States can dramatically affect the characters: for example, in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Carla is utterly shocked when she is discriminated against in the United States on the basis of her ‘dark’ skin colour as her class status in the Dominican Republic meant that she had previously been treated as if she were part of the favoured fair-skinned elite. Her sister Sandra instead suffers from a serious mental breakdown because of her ability to ‘pass for white’ (a feature highly praised in her country of origin) in the United States clashes with her need to identify with the rest of her family which is instead categorised as ‘coloured.’ Similarly, despite the shift in time period, Soledad’s fair skin allows her a conditional acceptance within the white-controlled arts community but also identifies her as a ‘stranger’ in her own family and community, potentially contributing to her desire to suppress and deny her own origins, which she perceives as incompatible with her chosen artistic career.

Language also plays a crucial role in the way in which Dominican Americans position themselves within their community, vis-a-vis other minority communities, both within American society and in relation to the Dominican Republic. Dominican Americans are influenced by African-American music, vocabulary, fashion and a wider anti-establishment stance — this is particularly evidenced in Díaz’s work— but we have seen how, by employing Spanish expressions and phrases within their English vernacular and by developing a new ‘Spanglish’ language, ‘coloured’ Dominican Americans also assert their identity by distinguishing themselves from the African Americans in their own neighbourhoods. A comparative study of the works of the authors under scrutiny here also allows us to chart different attitudes towards the use of Spanish which is generally associated with home, family and community. For example, while Iliana is bilingual, her family (or at least her parents) are predominantly monolingual: here Spanish is the language used within the diasporic spaces of home and church, while English is associated with the world outside familial and religious environments. Spanish is also the language the Garcías mostly identify with at home and it constitutes an important part of

their identity; due to their status, however, they are better placed to operate in the United States than the first-generation migrants depicted in the other novels. The Garcías' access to English, in fact, precedes their migration to the United States: the education of many of the members of this extended family takes place in the United States or has the acquisition of English at its core and we are told that in the 1950s both the father and the grandparents travelled regularly to New York. Díaz foregrounds the importance of Spanglish as the language used among youngsters in the community of Northern New Jersey. With *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee*, Cruz highlights how Spanish still remains central to older migrants who are mono-lingual or struggle with English (i.e. Don Chan, Doña Sosa, Esperanza, Olivia) but also enables younger characters like Soledad or Bobby to relate with the culture of their country of origin, their diasporic community and the wider Spanish-speaking community of the United States — a point also made by Díaz.

In respect to the use of Spanish words within these writers' texts, we find a variation in their use of this language and its function within their prose. In Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, it is noticeable that Spanish words are italicised to mark them out from the text's main language of English. Spanish words are thus signposted as 'foreign words' but are not meant to alienate mono-lingual readers, as reflected in Alvarez's choice of Spanish words which can often be easily comprehended by a mono-lingual speaker of English (for example, "Conquistadores") or by the fact that Spanish words are always followed by a translation into English. For example, when she is back in the Dominican Republic in 1989, Yolanda does not understand the Spanish word "antojos", which is also the title of the first chapter of the novel, so one of the aunts explains to her (and the readers) that "an antojo is like a craving for something you have to eat" (8). The fact that this scene appears in the first chapter itself, which, significantly, takes the Spanish word 'antojo' as its title, further demonstrates the use of Spanish in Alvarez's novel is not intended to alienate an English-speaking reader but to accentuate the way in which the author perceives herself as a foreigner in both countries/languages. The title of the novel, moreover, highlights the fact that the formation of a hybrid identity here is predicated on the loss of at least some aspects of the native language (namely, the 'accents') - in the novel as a whole, in fact, Spanish and English seem to be contradictory for Alvarez's characters in the sense that one language works to eliminate and perplex the use of the other. Yolanda's inability to understand 'antojo', therefore signposts the distance she has put between herself and her country of origin as does the fact that she is worried that if she speaks Spanish there, "when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English or, like her mother, mixing up some common phrase" (7). Spanish is also used to position the self in

antagonistic fashion in Alvarez's novel, as we have seen in the case of Sandra who says "gracias" (191) (and not 'thank you') as a stand against the white-American Mrs. Fanning in a crucial moment of proud identification with 'Spanish' culture when the Garcías are in a vulnerable position as foreigners in the United States and at the receiving end of discrimination which is also predicated on the fact that they are Spanish-speakers. Pérez's *Geographies of Home*, instead employs Spanish words very rarely, limiting their use mostly to names of characters, places, and endearment words, all not italicised. Given the lack of linguistic hybridity expressed by the characters themselves — the novel depicts a monolingual Spanish family — one could argue that it makes sense, paradoxically, that Pérez would choose to adopt a monolingual prose written in English in order to remind her readership that her characters are monolingual as well.

Moving to Díaz, there is a noticeable difference in the use of Spanish between his first book *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In Díaz's first book, the short story collection is provided with a glossary of Spanish words in its last pages. The choice of having the glossary in the index works to alleviate any alienation on the part of a monolingual English language reader but, at the same time, it tends to isolate and 'exoticise' Spanish words, signalling the fact that they are 'foreign' words. It is significant that, as John McDermott notes, this glossary was "added at the insistence of [Díaz's] publisher"²⁶³ and that in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* there is no glossary. In his second book, in fact, Díaz embeds generally non-italicised Spanish words and sentences in his prose, very often without footnotes that translate or clarify the words; only important concepts such as *fukú* are explained by the narrator. By the time he published his second book, it seems that Díaz had decided that Spanglish was an important element of Dominican-American culture and refused to cast Spanish words as 'foreign' words. In other words, the use of both Spanish and English as one hybrid language in Díaz's novel reflects his hybrid identity and his experience of being in a hybrid Dominican-American community. It is notable that the author continues his practice of Spanglish without translation in his subsequent story collection, *This is How You Lose Her*.

In *Soledad*, Cruz only uses minimal Spanish which, mostly, she does not italicise, and often deploys to make a point about the hybrid position of second generation migrants. For instance, when Soledad reacts with annoyance against the exclusion she feels when her aunt translates her spoken Spanish, she articulates her need to belong to the Spanish-speaking community as well as to the Anglophone wider community (13). Another example takes the

²⁶³ John McDemott, "Junot Díaz," *Financial Times*, 04 July 2014 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/a438f98e-01f4-11e4-bb71-00144feab7de.html>> (Accessed 06 June 2016).

written form of the list of men that Olivia had hidden in her tin box; Soledad, who is able to read the accompanying Spanish text, translates it into English for the English language readers thus asserting her ability to ‘bridge’ between the two communities (194-5). The names Cruz chooses for her characters are also meaningful in Spanish, for example, Gorda means a ‘fat’ woman, Flaca, the name of the cousin, means ‘skinny’, while Soledad means ‘solitude’. The names, if understood in Spanish, act as a shorthand commentary, allowing the reader an insight into the surface characterisation of these figures. In *Let It Rain Coffee*, Cruz uses more Spanish words than in her first novel, but still mostly for characters’ names and some street names, even within Washington Heights: significantly, once again, Spanish words are not italicised or marked in any other way in the text, highlighting how Spanish and English are equally important for Dominican Americans. She also employs terms used in Dominican Spanish in order to accentuate a regionally specific insight into the concept of masculinity, as when Santo, raised in the Dominican Republic, tries to teach his son Bobby to defend himself and tells him not to be a “pendejo” (55) instead of a more generic ‘coward’. Elsewhere, Spanish words are used to express regionally specific class distinctions, as when Esperanza resists being called a “trabajadora” (109), a word which means ‘employee’ in Spanish but which is used to refer to ‘servants’ in the Dominican Republic. Spanish greeting words are mostly employed by Don Chan: though the author relays his sentences in English for consistency with the rest of the prose, these words remind readers that Spanish is the only language Don Chan actually speaks and that the conversation which ensues has to be imagined as taking place in Spanish. Arguably, however, the identification between Spanish and Don Chan serves another broader purpose and is particularly poignant if one considers his Chinese descent and the author’s attempt to deconstruct monolithical depiction of Dominican identity and her commitment to depict a Dominican-American experience.

Notably, however, the four authors also tend to depict Spanish as the language of the patriarchal ideology of the Dominican Republic. For example, while Carlos insists that the García girls should continue to use Spanish as much as possible, his wife Laura, who finds life in the United States liberating in terms of gender allocations, favours the use of English even within the family home. The Spanish-speaking country, in fact, is seen as the place where wayward daughters are sent or should be sent for punishment and rehabilitation in line with patriarchal morality, as in the case of Sofía, Lola, Soledad, and Dallas. In Díaz’s novel, when Lola runs away from her family to live with her white and English-speaking boyfriend, she associates ‘Spanish’ with the patriarchal culture of the Dominican-American neighbourhood she has left

behind for a while. In *Let It Rain Coffee*, Dallas couples Spanish with her mother's threats and the maternal imposition of the traditional Dominican values she is trying to break free from: significantly, she chooses to challenge her mother by replying to her in English, a language her mother is not as fluent in as her daughter. The characters' association with different languages is, in fact, one of the ways in which generational conflict is signposted in the novels. Once in the United States, Alvarez's and Pérez's female protagonists struggle to make their voices heard in nuclear families controlled by a predominantly Spanish-speaker father/patriarch. Díaz and Cruz's narratives depict mother-headed households supported by an extended network of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents who speak Spanish among themselves and whose presence magnifies the pressure of Dominican traditions on those of the younger generation (especially girls), as members of the older generation are depicted as 'ambassadors' and gatekeepers of Dominican traditions and gender allocations.

In general, though, the narratives of all four authors examine and challenge traditional conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity and gender politics as they are deployed in the Dominican Republic, in Dominican-American communities, and finally within the United States itself. While I have argued that the Dominican women depicted across the texts achieve some kind of liberation after arriving in the United States, I have also argued that this liberation is constrained not only by Dominican patriarchal traditions but by American racial politics as well. In fact, while the texts advocate the United States as a somewhat liberating place in comparison to the Dominican Republic, they also depict the extent to which American racial politics undermines this liberation: for example, in the United States 'women of colour' are often exoticised: Yolanda is described as a "geography lesson" (99) by her white boyfriend's family, Dallas feels uncomfortable when a white-American lover appears unduly fascinated by her skin colour (209). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as we have seen, also highlights how the Dominican-American community upholds received conceptualisations of masculinity which limit the lives of male characters and pressurise them to act in line with the expectations of their families and communities. One could argue that Yunior invents Oscar's relationship with Ybón in order to normalise Oscar's masculinity according to Dominican standards but it is important that Oscar's love story is not predicated upon the (sexual) exploitation of women and also functions as a catalyst for a change of attitude in Yunior himself: at the end of the novel, in fact, Yunior seems committed to transform his way of life and, despite the fact that he might not be able to stop cheating altogether, he seems persuaded that Dominican *machismo* is self-harming, a

belief that is also at the core of *This is How You Lose Her*, where he deeply regrets his reckless behaviour.

The continuous negotiations and renegotiations of legacies and experiences at the core of the characters' lives are also central to the authors' creation and mapping of new 'territories' or 'imagined communities' which do not correspond to any physical place. It is well-known that Benedict Anderson has put print culture at the centre of those processes of identification which make individuals feel as part of a nation²⁶⁴ and if one were to trace the trajectory of Dominican American writing delineated by these authors, one could argue that they too resort to print culture (a print culture which, however, foregrounds the importance of orality and folk traditions) but that they do so in order to provide tools of identification for readers who are invited to participate in the creation of 'imagined communities' and home(land)s of the mind which discard the exclusionary practices of nation-building and are instead predicated on inclusion. *Let It Rain Coffee*, for example, posits a wider inclusive community based on the close interconnections between the United States and the Dominican Republic which seems to echo Alvarez's belief in fiction as a tool that allows the creation of "a country that's not on the map."²⁶⁵ To identify as "a Dominican American writer," according to Alvarez, is to refuse to label her writing as either Dominican or American and to establish "Dominican-American" fiction as a new category in literature which does not fit fully within the literary canon of the United States or the Dominican Republic but produces its own 'place' of belonging.²⁶⁶ *Geographies of Home*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Soledad* can be seen as stepping stones which, in their own way, also contribute towards the configuration of this 'place' of belonging. Mapping the very trajectory through which the protagonist finally finds her 'home' within the self, Pérez's novel itself constitutes a 'safe space' for a re-imaging of Dominican American identities. Díaz's use of Walcott as a springboard, identifies the marginalised individual as a 'nation' and the long quotation from *The Schooner Flight* which prefaces the novel implicitly highlights the crucial role that writing plays in establishing such identifications. As for Soledad, her understanding that her art is the very place in which she can house and creatively deal with the "clutter" (8) of her legacy by using the skills she has acquired at college echoes Cruz's inclusion of the protagonist's near-death experience and her foregrounding of Dominican folk traditions in a text that becomes a testing ground for such combinations. Arguably, therefore, by exploring and making available new 'textualised' ways of being

²⁶⁴ Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁶⁵ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

²⁶⁶ Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

Dominican Americans, the authors in question have created and claimed their own place of belonging — a “country that’s not on the map”²⁶⁷ — within the white-dominated literary establishment of the United States, alongside, but distinct from, other diasporic voices.

²⁶⁷Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 173.

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