

NATIONAL DISIDENTIFICATIONS: DIASPORIC IDENTITY FORMATION IN
CONTEMPORARY PUERTO RICAN AND DOMINICAN NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION

By

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ABSTRACT

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In the 20th Century, the mass exoduses that displaced thousands of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans to the United States marked the beginning of ethnic diasporas that have redefined preconceived notions of national identity. This dissertation focuses on contemporary narrative representations of Dominican and Puerto Rican migrations to the United States beginning in the first half of the 20th Century. The project addresses the processes of negotiation that take place in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural sites that result in the development of diasporic identities. At the same time, the project proposes that the intersections between the geographical and identity boundaries of these groups allow for cultural and individual interactions that affect the ways in which they negotiate their national ties beyond a state of liminality. The interactions resulting from these spaces of contention facilitate varied relationships and affiliations between diaspora and homeland. At the root of this project is my belief that the texts selected present diverse positions that rearticulate national identification in order to develop diasporic identities. The study contributes to critical work on diasporic identity formation as it comments on the processes of acculturation of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in the United States. While many studies dedicated to this topic have read identities in the diaspora as being located in liminal dilemmas, this dissertation presents how diasporic subjects develop national identifications that are not perpetually in conflict.

In the Introduction I discuss the critical approaches that see diasporic subjects as individuals that are located in an “in-between” space, and propose the study of Dominican and

Puerto Rican narratives of migration as case studies in which we can assess the intricacies contained in the development of diasporic identity formation.

In chapter 1, “Carving Identities in Writing: The Migrant *Jibara*, Gastronomy, Class and Encounter with the United States in Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993),” I explore the author’s narrative representation of her younger self as a Puerto Rican migrant, and the identity changes and national identification shifts brought upon dislocation.

In chapter 2, “Etching Identities in Alien Turfs: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* (1967),” I examine the role multi-ethnic and multi-racial urban environments play in the development of diasporic subjectivities and their impact on the subject’s racial, ethnic, and national identity consciousness.

In chapter 3, “(Re)Assembling Home in the Diaspora: Gendered Returns, Religion, and Patriarchy in Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* (1999),” I analyze the domestic junctures in which the formulation of “home” reproduces national discourses and their reexaminations from members of different migrant generations.

In the last chapter, “Fictionalizing History: Comic Books, Fantasy, Sci-Fi, and the (Re) Articulation of the Past in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007),” I focus on the process of writing about the nation-as-ancestral land as a form in which discourses about nationness can be rewritten.

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This project started as a question I made about Puerto Ricans in New York in a Hispanic Caribbean class the first weeks of the Master's program at Michigan State University. That day Prof. Danny Méndez enticed me to rethink my views and, afterwards, suggested me to revisit those "anxieties" as a migrant Puerto Rican in the United States. I am greatly indebted to him because, throughout my years as a student, he continued to encourage me to think and read with a critical eye. His classes not only deepened my knowledge and appreciation of Caribbean Literatures, but also taught me how to teach, how to motivate our students to learn, and how to engage them in class discussions. As an advisor, his professionalism and dedication to the field has been a constant source of motivation. He has provided me with a model to follow as I begin to forge my identity as an educator and researcher. *Gracias por todo querido.*

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INTRODUCTION

National Disidentification in Contemporary Puerto Rican and Dominican Narratives of Migration

On April 20, 1992, as part of the welcome remarks at the *Segundo Encuentro de Escritores Puertorriqueños de Puerto Rico y Nueva York*, Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega briefly traced the historical, economic, social, and ideological aspects surrounding the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States in the 20th century. Her remarks oscillated between that “other Puerto Rico” that created those “extraterrestrial versions of ourselves” (31)¹ and summarized the complex relationship between Puerto Ricans on both the island and New York in terms of the way each community have perceived each other historically. Vega’s observations revolved around the notion of national identification perceptions as it relates to the geographical distance of both Puerto Rican communities, as well as its reconceptualization through the prisms of social norms, the nation’s global perception, and racism. Vega’s objective was to highlight the conflicts of being “hounded by so many contradictory images of the Puerto Rican identity” (31), offering varying degrees of contention that—when viewed from her insular standpoint—have resulted in identity borders that have evolved into difference.

These notions of difference produced between dislocated communities are hardly a particularity of Puerto Ricans on the island and abroad since they mirror other migrant communities’ experiences around the world. On the other hand, for those geographically divided citizens of a nation exist points of consonance in which a country and its diaspora communicate effectively—one influencing positively the other. It is in this positive tone how Vega ends her speech acknowledging that, when it comes to the Puerto Rican identity, “there exists more than one way to negotiate with the same reality” (34).

Contemporary scholarship dedicated to the study of diasporas has taken a similar congenial approach focusing heavily in the way diasporic enclaves influence and challenge politics and normative notions of culture, race, gender, sexuality, and other identity aspects in the country of origin. As Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth have summarized in “Diasporas and International Relations Theory:”

Theoretically, diasporas have been posited as challenging traditional state institutions of citizenship and loyalty, and as an important feature of the relationship between domestic and international politics. Above all, they are regarded as a force in identity formation. Because they reside outside their kin-state but claim a legitimate stake in it, diasporas defy the conventional meanings of the state. They are therefore defined as the “paradigmatic Other of the nation-state,” as challengers of its traditional boundaries, as transnational transporters of cultures, and as manifestations of “de-territorialized communities. (449-450)

Similarly, in the study of Hispanic Caribbean diasporas—particularly the Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporas—a bulk of the scholarship have concentrated on how identities adapt to and are shaped by the new host society while challenging political, cultural, or identity notions in the homelands (Duany 2011; J. Flores 2010; Martínez San Miguel 2003; Rodríguez 2005; Torres-Saillant 1999). These *dynamics of challenge* are understood as products of the interactions promoted by cultural, social, and economic exchanges between the diaspora and the place of origin which—as is the case of Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic—are facilitated by circular migrations as well as the many technologies that ease communication. As such, theoretical concepts like *diasporic identity* and/or *diasporic subjectivities* become intuitive to describe the “difference” component that defines migrant identities. These components are the consequence of the amalgamation of experiences and outcomes resulting from their adaptation and acculturation processes. In this dissertation I contend that, in Hispanic Caribbean migration studies, the part that defines how these diasporic identities are formed need special attention.

Specifically, the part that deals with how migrant subjects relate and deal with definitions and identification with the homeland.

An analysis that considers how the migrant subject sees the homeland as “different” or as an Other would shed light about the formation of diasporic identities and clarify cases like writer Nicholasa Mohr. As a Puerto Rican born in New York, Mohr has prided herself of her “Nuyorican” origins, stating that she is “very grateful to have been born in New York” where there were many Puerto Ricans and “the culture was always intrinsically there” (C. Hernández 88). However, even when the writer was not deprived of her Puerto Rican culture, her views on Puerto Rico as a country present some interesting aspects about how she sees the island. For example, her gratitude for being born in the United States stems from the fact that she believes it would have been difficult to “fare in Puerto Rico as the youngest female in a poor family,” and considered that she “had a lot of more choices” because “women’s rights are stronger and more equitable in the United States” (C. Hernández 87). Her remarks direct us to the intriguing aspect of homeland awareness when it relates to the politics of ethnic, racial, gendered, and sexual inequalities. In Mohr’s case, her assertions raise some questions about her perceptions of Puerto Rico due to the fact that she was not born on the island: What are the bases for her conclusion about women’s opportunities on the island? Considering that Puerto Rico has a political relationship with the United States, is bound by the same federal regulations, mirrors the same state policies, and is under the same State policing: Why is it that for her Puerto Rico was a hostile environment for women? If in New York she belonged to a minority and a marginalized community: How does New York become a better space for women’s social development?

I use Vega and Mohr as examples of national identification dynamics brought upon subjects of dislocated nations. These two authors, as a representation of two fronts of homeland-diaspora relations, display the interesting perspectives of: 1) a subject’s understanding of

“national identity” in a homeland with a transnational community (Vega) and, 2) that of the migrant’s identification with the ancestral/home land (Mohr). The dualistic stance of subjects who identify with one nationality but are located in two distinct geographical spaces present us with two different points of view that are filtered through the perceptions of each other. My interest in this dissertation lies in the perspective the diasporic subject has of her/his homeland since it relates to a subject’s negotiations with multiple identity aspects that are the product of living in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural environment like many cities in the United States. These negotiations are, I argue, the foundation that affects a subject’s ties to their country of origin and national identification. If Mohr’s statements echo the perceptions of the ancestral land for many individuals in a diaspora, in this dissertation I am interested in analyzing how filiations and loyalty to the heritage homeland evolves in the Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporic setting.

Drawing from Dominican and Puerto Rican narratives produced in the United States, I will argue throughout this project that even when these narratives do show, in some instances, a strong connection with their homeland, there lingers the epiphenomena of shattered ties, the slow and protracted segmentation that speaks of diasporic subjectivity formation and homeland disengagement. As we will see through the analysis of Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I was Puerto Rican* (1994), Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Loida Marítza Pérez *Geographies of Home* (1999), and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the representation of Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic in these narratives is an important element that aids in voicing the problems of adaptation to the United States. However, these authors’ narratives do not necessarily focus on the homeland because they do not tackle issues related to their corresponding home countries. In turn, their narratives are “diaspora-centered” as they address subjects and themes that are relevant to their condition as migrant subjects. These writing acts contrast greatly with other narratives produced by these same communities at times

of political or social stress in their respective home countries. For example, Dominican writers in the United States criticized with their narratives both Rafael L. Trujillo and Joaquín Balaguer's political regimes in the Dominican Republic while living in the United States. Similarly, the literature produced in the Puerto Rican communities in New York in the first half of the 20th century tackled issues of nationhood and the independence of the island after the appropriation of the country by the United States in 1898.² The “migrant literature” I tackle in this dissertation, which has been produced in the last 50 years, can be referred as created by writers of what Shain and Barth calls “silent members” of the diaspora who, contrary to “core” members, are not directly involved in practices that intent to influence political and social change in the country of origin (452-53). I argue that by having a lack of a direct political enunciation when addressing issues that concern the islands, these Dominican and Puerto Rican narratives assemble a telos of diasporic identity formation that is facilitated by the multi-ethnic urban geographies they share. Concurrently, these narratives form a tropological dialogue within their ethnic communities that display similar stages of detachments with their homelands—even when these detachments act in tandem with emotional, cultural, and sociological links to the country of origin. This dissertation pursues the question of how diasporic identities are produced and enacted in relation to their homeland in these narratives. In other words, how the narrative representations assemble and/or disassemble the homeland in the subject's sensibility frameworks and speak of a disconnection with the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, respectively. This analysis, I argue, will allow us to: 1) get insights on the diverse perceptions of the homeland for the diasporic subjects, 2) observe the circumstances in which these detachments take place, 3) examine how the negotiations that take place during acculturation affect identity politics and cultural notions, and 4) identify how they result in the breakage of ties and filiations with the ancestral land.

Pinpointing steps in the migration process of an individual is an ambitious task. This is because isolating the trajectory from dislocation and settlement to host society integration is mostly a subjective enterprise. The processes of adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation, influence and affect many facets of identity, particularly for Dominican and Puerto Rican migrants in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic space that is the United States. As Ramón Grosfoguel and Chloé S. Georas have stated, migrant social identities are constructed and reproduced in complex political, economic, and symbolic hierarchies whose results are unequal accumulation of symbolic, political and economic capital. As the authors posit, these hierarchies in the United States have long been produced by white-male elites who are in charge of hegemonizing such social classifications (193). Upon migration, Dominican and Puerto Rican migrants are confronted with these unequal hierarchies of power that restructure their identity. In order to narrow down how the development of disentanglement from the homeland takes place, the analyses in the following chapters will concentrate mostly on the identity markers of race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as the representation of cultural manifestations produced in the diaspora. I contend that within the meshed networks stimulated by the United States political and social order—the institutional and state structure, and social practices wherein identity is immersed and affected—we need to look deeper for the instances that ignite processes of modification of the subject’s identity self-perception as a migrant. This idea of nation disentanglement in the context of an identity in the diaspora is informed in part by Stuart Hall’s proposition of identities in migrant settings in which he argues that “[d]iaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). In this context, the question I posit of how the subject’s perception of his national identification evolves will be framed under identity politics and cultural manifestations.

This will allow us to ascertain the production and reproduction of diasporic subjectivities, as they relate to the relationship between migrant subject and homeland.

In order to see how these narratives are linked to issues of identity formation in the diaspora, we need to contextualize how the process of insertion into another country is for the migrant subject. J. W. Berry indicates that scholars in cross-cultural psychology support the idea that there is a complex pattern of continuity and change in how people go about their lives in a new society (6). In the process of acculturation, Berry states, there are four different patterns or strategies in which the “non-dominant group” (i.e. the migrants) has the freedom to choose how they want to acculturate.³ These are: *assimilation*, in which groups and individuals decide not to maintain their cultural identity and seek for interactions that promote culture change with the host society or its culture; *separation*, in which individuals value their heritage and hold on to it; *integration*, in which there is an interest in maintaining one’s original culture while in interaction with other groups; and *marginalisation* (sic), in which there is no interest in cultural maintenance of either their culture or the culture of the host society (Berry 9).

In the case of Dominican and Puerto Rican migrants in the United States, it would be difficult to classify them as belonging to either group of these four categories due to the intimate character that “deciding how to acculturate” entails. This intimate character is greatly informed by the individual’s values of their heritage, as well as their ethnic or national group adaptation practices, the time they have spent in the diaspora, and the context and historical moment of their migration. However, the individuals and characters represented in the four narratives I will be analyzing move within the *integration* and *assimilation* strategies depending on the context of their migration and their migration status. As such, we will see individuals (like Esmeralda Santiago and Piri Thomas self-representations in their memoirs) and fictional characters (like those represented in Loida Maritza Pérez and Junot Díaz’s novels) whose portrayals vary

because they are either first-generation or second-generation migrants—a fact that influences their position towards the homeland as they are located in different stages of the acculturation process.

One important aspect about these processes of adaptation is the fact that acculturation has been long understood by critics as a process that inevitably brings social and psychological problems for migrants. Berry indicates that “such a generalization” no longer appears to be valid since the outcomes to acculturation are variable (12). The author states that there are three points of view that need to be taken into consideration when approaching an analysis of adaptation processes. First, the source of the migrant’s problems needs to be considered multi-cultural and not cultural (due to the fact that they are immerse in another culture). The second point of view refers to approaching acculturation with the possibility of the migrant subject’s experience of “culture shock” or “acculturative stress.” Lastly, understanding that psychological changes (“behavioural shifts”) have been demonstrated in psychology as easy to accomplish (Berry 12-13). My analysis will take these three points of view into consideration taking into special consideration the last one because, I argue, in the analysis of Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporas we cannot assume from the onset that a migrant identity is one that is always in conflict—and label it as being in an “in-between/hybrid” state.

Another important aspect that needs to be considered when talking about the acculturation processes in the diaspora of the Puerto Rican and Dominican communities is the fact that assimilation is not equal for all its members. As Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou have theorized, assimilation processes are not uniform in practice as there is not such thing as a parallel form of hostland integration for different migrant groups. Instead, the authors speak of “segmented assimilation” in which aspects such as race, place of settlement (location), and occupational mobility are socially vulnerable aspects that affect any coethnic community and

subject's integration to different sectors of the American society (82-87). Assimilation occurs at different degrees affected by race, ethnicity, gender, and particularly, class. These degrees locate the individuals at different levels in the hostland's social hierarchies. Integration is also influenced by what Alejandro Portes and Ramón Grosfoguel have named "modes of incorporation" of migrant groups. This term refers to "the process of insertion of an immigrant group at different levels of the host society" and is facilitated by "government policies, [and] mainstream attitudes towards the new comers" that informs the reception and acceptance of migrants in the United States (Portes and Grosfoguel 62). In the context of Hispanic Caribbean communities in the United States, Portes and Grosfoguel argue that contrary to Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans have had different modes of incorporation (62-63). Cubans reception, for example, was eased by the open political acceptance and federal assistance due to their refugee status during the Kennedy administration. On the other hand, the "Dominican immigration has not been singled out for restriction by U.S. authorities, but neither has it been favored with special programs" (Portes and Grosfoguel 64). This reception affects the economic progress and social adaptation of this community. Similarly, even when Puerto Ricans have easier access to the country because of their citizenship status, the impoverished communities created in earlier migrations along with the low or average level of education has "influence significantly the economic prospects of later arrivals" (Portes and Grosfoguel 66).⁴ These modes of incorporation inform the segmented character of assimilation for both Puerto Rican and Dominican communities. When tied to discrimination, class status, and economic levels, their incorporation places them as one of the most discriminated and stigmatized communities in the United States (Duany 77; Portes and Grosfoguel 64). This fact informs my decision of choosing Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as the subjects of my analysis because of the economic and social similarities between these groups that, as I see it, results in analogous forms of homeland disentanglement.

Because my aim in the following chapters is to identify how a migrant subject detaches from the homeland in social, cultural, and political aspects, this study requires an examination of these two separate social contexts: those of the homeland and hostland. Of these two contexts I will pay special attention to the homeland identification and cultural characteristics that accompany migrant subjects into the acculturation process, because these are the ones from which they disengage. As such, because I have chosen literature as the cultural material vehicle to situate my analyses, I will discuss later in this introduction how I will approach the representation of identity and cultural characteristics in these narratives. Before I can begin I need to flesh-out certain elements that I see influencing the processes of adaptation for Dominican and Puerto Rican migrant subjects. In the following lines I will discuss how I see the processes of homeland disentanglement as well as its relation to power and discourse. I will also give a working definition of the term “diaspora”—as it is important to know how and where I place the Puerto Rican and Dominican migrant communities within the theorizations of this concept. I will explain as well as how I see these narratives as “diaspora texts”—a way of reading cultural affinities in diaspora literary productions. Similarly, I provide a brief background of the Puerto Rican and Dominican migrations and discuss the migrant’s political and identity states in terms of race, nationality, return migration, remittances, and history, as brief examples of homeland detachments. These discussions are necessary because they serve as the base that will hold this analysis throughout the following chapters.

On this project, I will use the term *disidentification* for simplification purposes in order to encompass under one expression the processes of detachment and disentanglement from the homeland at different levels. As I see it, *disidentification* works in tandem with the acculturation processes that take place in the migrant’s environment. Rather than focusing on how the hostland influences identity, it concentrates on the processes of discontinuity to homeland attachments.

This dissertation provides as a point of departure this basic postulate: with dislocation comes disidentification. In the context of transnational subjects, I see disidentification as part of epistemological questions brought by dislocation because it deals with the ontology embedded in the national, cultural, and social understandings of the self and its encounter with a new society's structure. The processes of disidentification are not set in a specific stage of the acculturation course. It develops at different rates and frequencies that depend on various factors: the migrant's experience with their national past (through contact or education); the facility of adaptation allotted by the host society for their ethnic/national group; their knowledge of the new society's structure; and if the individual is a first migrant, came as child, or was born in the host country. As such, disidentification can be recognized as arranged in the form of questions of the home culture, their past, and their heritage, as well as comparisons between the two cultures and sites. Disidentification is fundamentally a process of psychosocial return in which the individuals confront their awareness of their diaspora environment with the social and cultural notions they have, or have acquired, of the homeland. This return to the homeland does not necessarily imply a geographical return, it is instead a revision of past values, culture, and idiosyncrasies that are questioned. As part of the negotiations promoted by the "in-between" position of the self, my analysis of disidentificatory characteristics will rotate on the multilayered axis of identity politics and cultural traditions, in order to examine how the conflicts, tensions, transactions, and understandings of these items define national identification for a "displaced" subjectivity.

Disidentification, as a term with critical or theoretical connotations, has been used in many scholarly areas that analyze the effects of different social environments in the subject's identity. In the field of Social Psychology for example, the concept has been used to analyze the consequences of stereotype threats that relate to academic underperformance. In here disidentification analyses the situations in which a person has the potential to confirm or negate a

negative stereotype about his or her social group (Gilovich, Keltner, and Nisbett 467). In recent times, Jose Esteban Muñoz assessed the concept in Queer Studies proposing disidentification as a way of negotiating mainstream culture codes through performance. In this context, Muñoz indicates “[d]isidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning... it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31). In this sense, to *disidentify* is not a way of aligning against or in line with exclusionary modes of hegemony, but a method of disarticulating these modes of meaning with the intention to create different cultural, political and social proposals. In the Social Sciences’ application of the concept, as well as in Muñoz’s adaptation to Queer Theory, disidentification works as a strategy of survival or resistance for minority subjects. If, in the former, the subject avoids confrontation with the forces in power, in the latter she/he appropriates the codes and languages embedded in the normative discourses to disempower them and highlight difference. Similarly, in my proposal of disidentification in the narratives I analyze, distance and appropriation are presented as strategies but applied to the context of adaptation. In this case, the appropriation of codes comes from the social sources of the host society, and the distance is from hegemonic discourses originated in the home countries.

In the field of Cultural Studies focusing on Hispanic Caribbean diasporas, nonetheless, an in-depth analysis of processes of disidentification in transnational and cross-cultural settings has not been done in order to ascertain how migrant identity formation relates, and is affected by the homeland. When analyzed in Cultural Studies, diaspora and homeland are often thought of as entities that in some situations blend in or, in not so many others, collide. In a social context, it is understood that part of the cultural remittances to the islands challenge normative notions and, as such, the relationship between the two spaces is somewhat consolidated. In a cultural context, conversely, there is an ongoing battle of whether or not (or how) the diasporic literature

production fits within the national (read homeland) canon. Seemingly, Cultural Studies scholarship has tended to favor these approaches to consolidation. By doing so this scholarship inadvertently disregards instances in which dissimilarity and disconnection are present. My approach to the Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives through disidentification proposes disentanglement with the homeland. As such, this approach polarizes the concept of the homeland-diaspora relations in order to present them as two separate entities that do not necessarily share a non-confrontational relationship. Creating this binary opposition, I argue, is vital in order to understand how homeland identification evolves in the migrant subject's sensitive, social, and political frameworks. It also gives us a window in where we can glimpse at how identity is codified once the migrant subject is inserted in the United States.

Aside from the approach in Social Psychology, Queer Studies, and Cultural Studies, the idea of disidentification is not necessarily new for Diaspora Studies. In "Diasporas", one of the prominent analyses in the study of transnationalism, James Clifford uses the term stating: "diasporic forms of longing, memory and *disidentification* are shared by a broad spectrum of minority and migrant populations" (emphasis added) (304). Clifford highlights the importance of disidentification as a process in which diasporic identity formation is equated to "memory" (the understanding of one's past) and "longing" (the position of the homeland in the subject's sensibility frameworks). Both "memory" and "longing" are highly subjective. In this dissertation I will prove disidentification from this perspective of subjectivity, but as a critical tool to understand the subject's identity evolution: first through the development of a gendered national identity in the diaspora (Santiago), then through racial and ethnic conflicts (Thomas), following with an analysis of the concept of return home (Pérez), and ending with an appreciation and rewriting of the historical past (Díaz).

Little critical attention has been paid to this perspective of disidentification as a crucial aspect in the study of Hispanic Caribbean diasporas, particularly Dominican and Puerto Rican cultural studies. A possibility for this could be the understanding that, at this point in history, these diasporic communities are oftentimes presumed as located at a threshold, positioned in that in-between space that Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*), Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Néstor García Canclini and others have theorized as “hybrid” for subjects and cultural formations bound to a state of intermediacy and liminality.⁵ Nonetheless, agreeing with and without naively disregarding the catalogue of scholarship that approaches these communities through this critical lens, I propose the study of narratives of migration produced by migrant writers that focuses on disidentification in order to understand the intricacies of the diasporic subject formation. I do not intend, however, to present disidentification-as a process that, in our time, is complete (leading to full acculturation and immersion) and easily identifiable. Instead, I argue that we can start detecting scattered pieces that seem to be present in some cultural productions and that, over time, could lead to complete homeland identification detachments. It is impossible to catalogue personalities as there is not going to be a single way of understanding diasporic subjectivities because they are the product of different forces impacting them. As critics we can only try to highlight those instances in which we see traces of apparent similitude. From there we can build a knowledge that will aid in organizing the many instances in which diasporic subjectivities spread, reproduce, and evolve. I use disidentification as a heuristic device rather than as a fixed category because it can be molded into a multiplicity of approaches in the cultural study of migrant subject formation. The idea behind the concept of disidentification helps, I hope, in creating a model in which we can approach these subject formations by focusing on how they are shaped in the migrant settings not by what they absorb from it, but by what they leave behind. Only then, I argue, we can understand the deeper issues of immersion and identity negotiations.

My interest in Puerto Rican and Dominican communities from this perspective of disidentification stems from two different historical and social observations. First, if we consider the social evolution of other migrant communities that have settled in the United States over the past two centuries we can see how, after a couple of generations, individuals from any given ethnic or racial group lose their connection and affiliations with their ancestral land. In these groups, over time—and not without an initial political, social or economic resistance—subjects have been able to insert themselves in the American social structures through acculturation, developing competence in the language, values and rituals of the host society. For example, Irish migration to the United States around the 1850s, German migration in the 1880s, and Polish migration around the 1890s, led to an influx of descendants whose subjects, in two or three generations, no longer identified with or had a loyalty to their respective “homelands.” In the 21st century, these migrants’ relationship with their heritage land can be limited to celebration of events and cultural practices (holidays, gastronomy, religious practices to name a few). In these contexts, what at one time was a form of national identity has turned into heritage. Ties and affiliations with the homeland were lost over time resulting in an American identification even when enclosed in ethnic and/or racial social limitations.

The second observation that ignites this study relates to the importance of language acquisition in identity and social formations, particularly the role English language plays within the Puerto Rican and Dominican communities that have migrated. As shown by some scholars in Linguistics, the development of English in migrant communities in the United States shifts from second language acquisition and bilingualism to full loss of the Spanish language for some individuals in the second or third-generation of migrants.⁶ In "The Need for Language Planning in the United States," Joshua A. Fishman has stated that English primacy is considered “ensured

because such dominance and spread are to have favorable consequences: peace, plenty, and progress” causing a lack of consciousness of other languages in the country (34). These “favorable consequences” are related to the aspiration and consecration of the ethos of the American Dream, and the objective of upward mobility in migrant populations. Similarly in *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York* (1997), linguist Ana Celia Zentella has ethnographically proven that the role of these ideals of upward mobility, as they relate to English primacy at home, results in a shift and loss of Spanish in newer generations of migrants. This loss of Spanish is a minor form of language-based disidentification with the country of origin; however, I am interested in examining the relationship the English language has with the migrant subject’s cultural education. In her study, Zentella spent a decade analyzing the languages of school children in *El Bloque*—a community of Puerto Ricans in New York City—focusing on observations of child-rearing processes in multiple generations and its relation to language acquisition and homeland cultural transference. Like Fishman, Zentella found that the thriving force for an English education at home was linked with a desire for upward mobility, but in this case cultural values of the homeland were retained, even when there was a loss of Spanish due to the English education (213, 241).

By considering the influence of language in the lives of migrant subjects, I do not intend to place disidentification within language-focused nationalism ideologies per se. Instead, I wish to contemplate the machinery behind the primacy of English over the native/home language and its relation to homeland’s cultural transference. Because subjectivity and identity formation have its origin in language, and through language comes the competencies and assimilations of values and cultural rituals of any social group, this primacy of English over a Spanish-based culture imposes a social and cultural “American” filter, and a gaze, that modify its codes. I wish to emphasize the importance of the mechanisms behind the power of language in which the migrant

subject would need to rely and fall in order to be able to adapt and move as a societal individual, because with language comes along the codes of social, cultural, and political orders. As I see it, the modification of the migrant's reality (in English) is the one that informs their Spanish reality, thus modifying and providing a different value to its codes. Naturally, this is different for first-generation migrants who migrated with little or no knowledge of the host society but who, similarly, have had to indoctrinate into this language. The generational disconnection with a homeland (as is the case of German, Polish, and Irish migrations), the fact that there is a loss of Spanish in the second or third generation, as well as the influences that language can have in one's social and cultural knowledge, became the observations that originated my inquiries of disidentification in this dissertation. As a way of analyzing the logics behind disidentification, the narratives I will be evaluating have been produced by Hispanic Caribbean writers in the diaspora (first- and second-generation), who write from and about their migrant experiences in English.

Knowing the codes of American social, cultural, political, and economic structure is not something that is facilitated by the knowledge of English alone. Many Puerto Rican and Dominican migrants are able to adapt and assimilate to the United States with little knowledge, or no knowledge, of the language through other social connections—which vary depending on how multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and open to pluralism their places of settlements are. I argue that, since the adaptation process result in the engagement with the codes of the United States social order, this process ignites in consonance an examination of the homeland's social, cultural, political, and economic structures. This results in putting the place of origin into a different perspective and, as such, it is the initiating steps towards disidentification. These elements of the adaptation process, on the surface, relate primarily to the influence of political, social, economic, and cultural codes and discourses from the United States in Dominican and Puerto Rican migrant

subjects. Puerto Rican and Dominican colonial histories inform the instances of disidentification as they relate to the ideals of progress brought by United States discourses and their respective homeland's positions in those discourses. I align with William Robinson who advocates for the effects of the particular role of economic systems in the United States in the conformation of Latino groups. In "'The Global Economy and the Latino Populations in the United States,'" Robinson states that even when cultural and political determinations influence groupings and consciousness, these "only become 'operationalized' through structural determinants rooted in the U.S. political economy and in a historic process of capital accumulation" that influence Latinos' assimilation (29-30). Portes and Zhou have similarly associated economic advancement as a source of "preservation of the immigrant community's values and solidarity" (82) that aids in safeguarding and maintaining diasporic communities' ideals and cohesion. In my analysis I will only briefly discuss the instances in which economy influences the subjects to identify with the hostland since these instances are not clearly defined in the narratives I have chosen. Nonetheless it is important to stress that these influences are condensed in the form of a desire for upward social mobility in some of the narratives (in Esmeralda Santiago and Loida Marítza Pérez). In turn, I would like to consider this historic process of capital accumulation and the desire for upward mobility as a backdrop catalyst that promotes the examination of the homeland's structure and hostland associations that influences hybridity.

When analyzing hybridity and mimicry during colonization, Homi Bhabha argues that the colonized subject is reproduced as almost the same, but not quite, as the one in power (122). Bhabha adds that mimicry, as a mode of colonial discourse, is "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (122). In a diasporic setting, this reproduction of hybridity and mimicry confronts and problematizes boundaries between migrant subject and the subject in power, even

when these boundaries are not erased. However, “reform, regulation and discipline” as Bhabha states are practices that do not necessarily inform of the depth of the Puerto Rican and Dominican migrant subject’s social and cultural appropriations and his/her visualization of power. I contend that their visualization of power is linked to an acknowledgement of these discourses of power (colonial, racial, ethnic, etc.) in which the subjects see themselves immersed. That is, in their geographical location in the United States (away from the margins their homelands suppose in these discourses), the subjects also see themselves inserted at the center of power. The result of this dynamic is, as Clifford has stated, that “feelings of diasporic identity... encourage antagonism, a sense of superiority to other minorities and migrant populations” (315). As I see it, in the context of a diaspora located in the United States, these dynamics also apply to the migrant’s homeland. This antagonism begins when the subject sees her/himself as to no longer being colonized, (or post/neo-colonized)—even when socially inferior in position to the hegemonic structure. In turn they identify more with their present environment (the place where she/he is located) and reproduce and transmit the same imperial discourses (and readings) of their homelands. If diasporas are the paradigmatic Other of the nation state (Tölölyan, “Exile”), and borders help define specific spaces where the image of self is developed, there is no blurred border between a diaspora and its homeland but a defined and clearly articulated boundary that stratify individuals: the Others, and those who produce discourses of the Other. In this light, diasporization can now include definitions of difference and value and new versions of the same national identification are formed; whether they be through discourse, ideology, or language. If a population that undergoes transformation in a distant place hangs in the “insidious promise of being remade in the Other’s image” that the domination of that Other has favored, allowing “the illusion of successful mimesis” as Édouard Glissant has stated (15), this new identity formation is one that is formed with transitions for the

understanding of the homeland. As we will see in Esmeralda Santiago and Loida Maritza Pérez, if homeland at one point was a source that exerted discursive operations of identity in which nationalistic forms took place as a way to strengthen national ties, the individual needs of the subjects portrayed shifted and moved them closer to this “illusion of mimesis.” Through them we will see how for both first- and second-generation migrants homeland was a source that exerted discursive operations of identity in which nationalistic forms took place—like in the early diasporas mentioned—but the circumstances characteristic of posing as a migrant in a diasporic environment drive them to be “remade in the Other’s image.”

This position of being outside of the margins (when compared to the homeland) is, I propose, what ignites the negotiations and comparisons that initiate disidentification. The need for understanding one’s place in the new space produces these personal examinations of the relationship with the heritage past along with shared ethnic, cultural, and social associations produced by the every-day life events in the diaspora. This process directs to a rupture of conceived ideas of the nation and, due to comparison, negotiations with the ancestral land are ensued. Considering that many historical, social, and personal experiences regulate the levels of disidentification to varying degrees, it is important for this study to identify common threads in these interactions. As such, I would like to highlight common focus points for these shifts in loyalty as presented in the narratives to be analyzed. Some examples are: 1) the interpretation of the country of origin in terms of development and their place in modernity; 2) the role of homeland’s ethical and moral values in terms of their value in the hostland’s society; and 3) the perpetuation and place of cultural manifestations or cultural items transplanted, or learned through heritage education. All of these factors are reevaluated by the subjects—along with the issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—and seem to lose meaning over time turning these national symbols into a patrimony of difference and distance.

By way of questioning and comparing elements of their homelands, there comes a sense of acceptance and assimilation that makes the individual feel closer to where their physical bodies are. Nostalgia, longing, and idealization of the homeland lingers at the heart of this distanced nationalism, but also coexists with the political realities that the diaspora structures—with its social changes, acceptance of institutional systems, racialization, ethnicization, etc.—imposes upon them. The processes of examination I have described above work on a strategic level, to ease adaptation. Questioning the homeland shapes the path for hybridization and, eventually, to alliance to a diasporic identity. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have pronounced that the process of becoming an Other is not produced by mere filiation because, as they see it, “all filiation is imaginary.” Becoming, they posit, “concerns alliance” (238). I argue that it is at these stages of inquiries where alliances to the hostland begin to take shape.

The organization of the following chapters aims to follow the formation of these alliances as they gradually take shape in Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporic contexts. As I mentioned before, my focus will be examining these narratives and its subjects as “silent members” of the diaspora, as Shain and Barth posit for subjects who do not intend to influence political and social change in the country of origin (452-53). For these “silent members”, the fantasy of being located at the center of power generates a sense of agency in which political action, subversion or opposition to power does not govern them because their position creates a sense of belonging. This idleness appears to be a necessary and innate state in order to understand their place in the diaspora. Individuals walk the city, are dispersed within neighborhoods, counties, and districts, yet, the dynamics of their movements are regulated by the same set of U.S. social policies they follow. It is in this sense that “homeland”—the supposed/proposed place of origin—is “the other” place that is (*supposed to be*) known and familiar to the subject. In these narratives, homeland memories or visits do not always result in a return migration or even an ideal of

permanent return. Nationhood, tradition, and patrimony exist in the imagery, in the realm of transplanted stories, constructed memories, and exoticized dreams that assemble the myths of the homeland. These myths are only kept alive in the subject's psyche, as well as the mementos scattered throughout the cities. It will only take a visit to Humboldt Park in Chicago, Spanish Harlem or Washington Heights in New York, to witness the physical imprints—sometimes subtle, others not so—of the Dominican and Puerto Rican communities in these cities.

In order to visualize how these narratives are placed within disidentification and the wider scholarship of transnationalism, it is necessary to frame these communities in the current scholarly discussions of diaspora. Sociologists and cultural studies scholars have rethought longstanding definitions of diaspora, which were originally defined through the lens of Jewish and, to some extent, Armenian experiences. Ongoing theorizations and debates regarding the concept of diaspora have focused on its meaning and its application to multiple contexts in which diaspora can be thought of as neoliberalist forces shape the structure of the world order. These theoretical debates over different conceptions of diaspora address: dispersal and idealization of the original homeland (along with a narrative of return), alienation on the place of settlement, an ongoing relationship with the place of origin, and a collective consciousness of “ethnonational” identity. These multiple layers of (sometime conflictive) interpretations aid in avoiding a totalizing definition of diaspora as a concept by incorporating the circumstances that promotes migration and migrant settlements. I align with Shain and Barth's condensed definition of diaspora in which they see present diasporas as: “people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis, outside the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland—whether that homeland is real or symbolic, independent or under foreign control” (452). I use this definition in order to encompass the different social, economic, and political conditions that motivate Puerto Rican and Dominican migrations, as well as the idea that diaspora members identify themselves

or are identified by others as such. Defining diaspora in this way allows for expanding the concept to share meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, and ethnic community (Tölölyan, "Nation-State" 4-5). This expanded designation modifies diaspora's conceptualization to "attain new epistemological, political and identitarian resonances" (Brazier and Mannur 4), which have facilitated the incorporation into the discussion of at least thirty ethnic groups who declare themselves or are described by others as diasporas (Baser and Swain 8). By streamlining the complexity of the concept, I align with recent theorizations that present diasporas as communities rather than post-colonies (Brazier and Mannur 5) even as I take into consideration the post-colonial and neo-colonial conditions of the Puerto Rican and Dominican groups in the United States. Influenced by the ideas forwarded by Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and James Clifford, cultural criticism approaches diaspora as a discursive mode rather than a delineated social formation in which its identity articulations are distinguished by hybridity. Hybridity "opens diasporic subjectivity to a liminal, dialogic space wherein identity is negotiated (Brazier and Mannur 5). My approach to diaspora's hybrid articulations under the disidentification framework is partly informed by Kobena Mercer's theory of diasporic "critical dialogism." As Brazier and Mannur explain it, Mercer's critical tool "challenges the monologic exclusivity on which dominant versions of national identity and collective belonging are based" allowing a "powerfully *syncretic* dynamic, which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and *creolizes them*, disarticulating given signs and rearticulating their symbolic meaning" (Brazier and Mannur 5). I find Mercer's approach helpful because it allows us to see diaspora as a powerful social entity that is not necessarily bound to the rigidities of nationhood and their respective colonial traces, nation-state policies, religious histories, and

other provenances it brings that bind it to specific displacement and adaptation states in which diaspora analysis are sometimes deployed.

My way of approaching these Dominican and Puerto Rican diaspora narratives is a perspective that sees these texts as a mode of reading the cultural affinities their subjects have with their countries of origin and that have been created through displacement. As I see it, these “diaspora texts” are placed at a juncture where what could be considered translocal is, in actuality, treated as localized, even though they may be informed by the experiences and practices of another place. This approach requires these texts to be moved outside of the nation-based social and political frameworks, even when there is the acknowledgement that these frameworks cannot be bypassed. Reading in this *diasporic mode* also makes us attend to the ways in which external (national) locality, geographically or symbolically, figures as a dynamic and relational experiential entity. Therefore, I use “diaspora” as an epistemological, cultural and historical category of analysis that is located within (and is a product of) the mechanisms of global capitalism brought by late modernity and that is centered at the axis of power in the context of the Dominican and Puerto Rican post-colonial and neo-colonial histories.⁷ Both Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporas—specifically to the inner-city areas of the Eastern United States—need to be understood within the context of peripheral migration towards the hegemonic center of the so-called First World (Valerio 1). What links the Dominican and Puerto Rican migrations together are the histories of U.S. occupations that the countries share, which aided the large-scale migratory movements that established their diasporas.⁸ Approaching these diasporas in this way polarizes some contemporary definitions of diaspora and homeland, maintains the critique of the binarisms circulating within colonial and post-colonial critical discourse, and also follows the evolution of these conflicts in the host society at different stages of these countries’ migrations.

The Dominican migration is often divided in two periods marked by the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo from 1930 to 1961. Before these periods, migratory movements were relatively small—only 2,422 people had migrated from 1925-1929 (Duany 56)—and a Dominican diasporic community as it is known today did not exist. During the Trujillo dictatorship, a restrictive policy that secluded the country's contact with the rest of the world impeded a mass migration that, contrary to Puerto Rico in the same period, increased the population of the Dominican island. After Trujillo's assassination on May 30, 1961, there began a Dominican large-scale migration to the United States and Puerto Rico. Between 1950 and 1959 9,915 people migrated away from the island and in the next decade, due to the U.S. military intervention, the number rose to 84,065 (Duany 56). The beginning of the Dominican mass migration was rooted in political turbulence rather than economic motives, which became the cause for the migration in the succeeding decades. With the passage of time, different migratory waves diversified the racial and economic class components of the diaspora. As of 2010 a total of 1,128,538 Dominicans have migrated to the United States since 1925; this total does not include the number of American-born Dominicans. Following Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, the citizens of the Dominican Republic make up the fourth largest immigrant group in the United States.

Puerto Ricans began their migration to the United States in small numbers before the American occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898. The political event that augmented migration was the extension of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 through the Jones Act. However, it was after 1947, with the creation of Operation Bootstrap to promote the island's development through industrialization were (a period dubbed by historians as) "The Great Migration" took place. This stage of migration is characterized as a "state-supported project of emigration [that worked] as a safety valve for Puerto Rico's socioeconomic problems" (Duany 85) as the

government created multiple programs both in Puerto Rico and in New York that promoted the dislocation and aided the people who decided to migrate. In *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (2011), Jorge Duany highlights the importance of this government sponsored migration when he says that it is “one of the first modern states, colonial or postcolonial, to organize migration transnationally” (82), as well as being the “first large-scale airborne migration in history” (52). Similar to the Dominican migration, over the years the racial and class components of the Puerto Rican population in the United States has diversified along with places of settlement, moving from the New York metropolitan area to other cities, like Chicago, IL and Orlando, FL. Puerto Ricans represent the second largest number of U.S. Latinos, after Mexicans; approximately 4.4 million Puerto Ricans live in the US, more than the island's population. (Duany 210).⁹

Even as Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico may share similar cultural heritages and geographic space, different political and identity realities inform each country's migration and diaspora configurations. As with many other migratory groups to the United States in the 20th century, these communities faced conflicts brought by cultural and social differences. Scholars have historically identified aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, and gender, as key issues that create sites of struggle, conflict, and tension. These issues have shaped the establishment of the communities and their transitions to host society integration. As I mentioned before, my analysis of the narratives in the following chapters will cover these three identity aspects as they relate to disidentification. Nonetheless, it is necessary to contextualize them in order to understand the point of departure of such conflicts as presented in the narratives.

As Duany, and Portes and Grosfoguel have indicated, both Dominican and Puerto Rican communities in New York have become two of the most stigmatized ethnic minorities in the United States (Duany 77; Portes Grosfoguel 64). Part of the stigmatization of both communities

comes from the convoluted racial history of the United States. Framed in the context of U.S. racial categories that often fuse ethnicity and race together, racial self-identification of the Dominican and Puerto Rican communities has changed to fit the rigid parameters of the United States' racial color lines. For example, according to the 2009 Census, 56.3% of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora considered themselves white, as opposed to 7.0% who identify as black. Interestingly, 28.2% identify as "other race" (Duany 79). In the Dominican diaspora, 34.5% identify themselves as racially white, 10.7% as racially black and 48.5% as racially "other" (Duany 79). These statistics, particularly the "other race" racial category, present a tripartite system that places Latinos as a middle race between blacks and whites in the United States (Duany 78) and it also gives an inadequate representation of the racial composition of the communities.

The racial conflicts within these diasporas mirror and perpetuate the conflicts of race in their respective homelands. For both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, these conflicts have their foundation in the racial discourses that originated in the 19th century wherein racial heritage was formulated from a direct Hispanic (Spanish/European white) lineage, thereby disregarding any black or indigenous heritage. In the 20th century these discourses were appropriated by the main political parties in power: *El Partido Popular Democrático* led by Luis Muñoz Marín in Puerto Rico (with the symbol of the *jíbaro*, the Puerto Rican countryside worker),¹⁰ and during the dictatorship of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. With the latter, as it is known, the erasure of a black heritage took a violent turn during the Trujillato era when the government sponsored the massacre of thousands of Haitian immigrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent in 1937. At the end of the 20th century, the work of scholars—more prominently José Luis González in Puerto Rico and Silvio Torres-Saillant in Dominican Republic—sought to unmask the official racial discourse by rescuing the African heritage from the white discourse

sovereignty.¹¹ It is behind this racialized historical backdrop of perpetuated omissions and erasures where shifts in racial self-perception in the Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporas have developed. The change in racial self-perception and identification of the migrant communities (by way of silence and or multi-identification) brought by the racial or ethnic codes in the United States can be considered an initial step towards disidentification from homeland racial norms. These subjects adopt in the new racial order a particular Hispanic/Latino identity disregarding the racial structures of the homeland, however problematic these ones may be in themselves.

Another aspect of identity that shows signs of disidentification is related to the communities' national or ethnic identification through the usage of national/ethnic nomenclatures or hyphenated derivatives. In a 1993 fieldwork, Duany found that most migrants from the Dominican Republic called themselves Dominicans and few accepted the derivative labels of Dominican-American or Dominican-York. Similarly, Puerto Ricans rarely ascribe to the label of Puerto Rican-American (Duany 76). The term "Nuyorican"—often used to describe the Puerto Ricans in New York—was coined by a group of Puerto Rican poets in order to differentiate themselves from the Puerto Ricans on the island. This term is different from "Dominican-York" in its origins as its discriminative usage from island Puerto Ricans implied a cultural, linguistic, and class difference. The artists and writers in New York who identified as such, appropriated the word and were able to remove the negative charge from the term, transforming its meaning to represent their diasporic identity. Both "Dominican-York" and "Nuyorican," while contesting normative forms of American identity, affirm hybrid cultural experiences and identities that differentiate them from their islands' origins. These operations of self-identification, however, continue to vary as the number of U.S-born migrants rises. For example, in both Puerto Rican and Dominican cases, some dark-skinned members of the second generation have adopted an Afro-Dominican identity and have embraced a pan-Latino identity,

such as “Chicago-Ricans” because of their relationship with other Latino migrant groups that share a common Hispanic origin (Duany 54, 76). These varied cultural and ethnic identities are responses to local conditions and direct us to the conflicts confronted by both communities as a result of their links to the homeland and the hostland social, national, and racial categories. If a hybrid identity configuration presupposes the arrangement of elements from distinct spheres (whether racial, cultural, etc.), then the resulting permutation that comes from identity items that form new cultural and social categories and models can be considered a form of disidentification. This disidentification, I argue, is beyond hybridity because identity appropriations become more intricate and localized.

Another alluring element that speaks of the gradual decrease of attachments to the homeland lies in the statistics found for return migrations and remittances that are fostered by the relationship these diasporas have with their countries of origin. Of these relationships, the Dominican Republic is the only country that has redefined its definitions of nationality and citizenship in order to integrate its diaspora into the social and political spheres of the nation. For example, in 1994 the Dominican Congress approved dual citizenship to its citizens outside of the island; consenting an acceptance of its diaspora and facilitating its member’s identification, political involvement, and social relationships with the country. Conversely, the Puerto Rican government has not fully incorporated its migrant population into homeland’s social, political and/or cultural spheres by adopting similar positions. In *La memoria rota* (1993), Arcadio Díaz Quiñonez states that even at the highest point of the Puerto Rican migration in the 1950s, when the government sponsored relocation to New York City, there was a silence regarding migration in the official discourse. The author argues that this is probably in part due to the migrant population, who suggested the need to redefine the boundaries of the Puerto Rican identity, and this project ran counter to the exclusivist national discourse of the Puerto Rican elite (50-51).

Nonetheless, in 2014, the island government began to show a new interest in the diaspora by promoting programs to attract the migrant population back to the island in order to improve the home economy. The success and effects of these proposals is yet to be seen.¹²

The flexibility allotted by these policies impact the statistics of return migration with the economic and cultural remittances from the diasporas to the islands. After the period known for the highest increase of return migration (from 1965 through 1980), only 6.2% of Puerto Rico's population were born in the United States even when a large portion of Puerto Ricans were born outside of the island (Duany 53). In regard to remittances, 29.2% of Dominicans on the island receive money from their families in the United States, while only 5% of Puerto Ricans do, even though Puerto Rico has a larger migrant population than the Dominican Republic (Duany 217). Also, in terms of money transfers, Dominicans transfer over seven times more money than Puerto Ricans (Duany 213). If, as Duany indicates, "[r]emittances are one of the most tangible expressions of transnationalism" (222) because they speak of solidarity and reciprocity between nations (209), the statistics of these transactions show us how deep these processes of disentanglements can be when we compare both countries' return migrations, remittances, and population located in the United States. In this sense, Dominicans are more in touch and economically connected to their country's needs than Puerto Ricans. This is because the Dominican Republic does not share the economic benefits of political links to the United States as Puerto Rico does.

I have highlighted these changes in self-perception of race, national identification, remittances, and return migration in order to present them as instances in which disidentification can easily be seen at work in the every-day lives of migrants and in diaspora migrant communities. The reduction of attachments with the homeland for both countries—in terms of return migration and remittances—affects the countries spaces' relationships with migrants and

influences disidentification. The individual relationship between these elements of identification with the homeland and the host society can be posited as an initial gesture towards assimilation, or as a semiotic appropriation in order to highlight difference in a host(ile) society that imposes definition.

Similar to the way in which disidentification markers are not set in specific stages of the acculturation process, the rate and intensity of which disidentificatory processes take place for both the Dominican and Puerto Rican migratory experiences is correspondingly unequal. This is because of the way political, social, economic, and cultural histories of both countries develop independently from their history in the diaspora. In other words, the continuity of history of both the Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporas—when placed side by side with the history of their respective homelands—informs and motivates disidentification at different degrees. For example, when it comes to transnational communities one may talk of a parallel national history, or histories, of a geographically divided community. Depending on the degree of the acceptance of the community abroad, the national history of a diaspora could be inserted into national history narratives. However, in the narratives of the Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporas analyzed in the following chapters, the events of every-day life resulting from social, economic, and political interactions take place in a location outside of the national history's continuum. Because of the geographical distance, both communities miss shared events. It can be argued that Benedict Anderson's notion of nation formation—that incorporates the role of newspapers in the 19th century as a technology that aided in the concept of an imagined community—can be applied to transnational communities today. Particularly at this point in history when technologies developed and distributed through the process of globalization facilitate communication across geographic distances even more. However, this is not the case of these communities (as expressed in these narratives). Nonetheless, I am not implying a complete

disconnection with the place of origin. In the Puerto Rican and Dominican contexts communication exists in economic remittances, the sharing of political concerns and the cycles of return migrations, however minimal these may be. Nationalism is enhanced for each nation when special circumstances require the need for amplification of the nationalist sentiment. This last circumstance, popular in nature, results from the particular needs that are characteristic of the political conditions of each country. For example, Dominican and Puerto Rican communities exemplify the need to demonstrate a nationalist spirit whenever this one is felt as threatened by the annexationism of the island with the United States, in the case of Puerto Rico, or the need for some sort of national pride for Dominican Republic.¹³ In these cases the “reaching out” for the communities abroad is linked to a need of validating national identity. In addition to these instances of connectivity, shared national history continuity follows different paths and, over time, the instances that promote mutual interests between these diasporas and their countries are greatly diminished. Even when emotional and symbolic meanings persist, the lack of an integrative history consciousness leads to stages of disidentificatory sensibilities.

The analyses in the following chapters will demonstrate that even when there are differences in the way disidentificatory markers are presented in Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporic narratives, there is also a simultaneous correlation between the two countries. In this project, my focus on Puerto Rican and Dominican communities in the United States as “case studies” for disidentification stems from the connections I see in the literatures of both nations. Some scholars argue that economic conditions of Latinos in the United States are what link their diasporic experiences because their histories cannot be understood outside of the context of the U.S. political economy and the international division of labor brought by globalization (Darder and Torres 3). However, for my analysis, I turn to the evolution of the literary representations of the Puerto Rican and Dominican nations as well as their scholarly interpretations in order to

juxtapose them with their respective diaspora narratives. By bridging Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporas through literature I do not intend to speak of a politics of cultural nationalism—which is often used to give power within Latino communities in the United States—but to highlight the intriguing similarities between the literatures of these two diasporic communities. The intersections of the Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives produced in the diaspora showcase how a convoluted space like a diasporic environment influences two communities (with different histories and varied socio-cultural designs) that are informed by similar national narratives but produce voices that speak of similar stages of disentanglement. In the analyzed narratives we will see how these diasporas’ identity refer to and accentuate different aspects of their nation’s literary themes and metaphors and, as Shain indicates for diaspora narratives, “a certain degree of flexibility can be preserved” since each diaspora, “to a degree, put its own ‘spin’ on the national narrative and live out their shared identity in its own way” (Shain, “Role” 118).

It is his “spin” on the national narratives what has made scholars rethink the nation from the diaspora, turning diaspora into the paradigmatic other that has prevalence in insular affairs. In contemporary Dominican scholarship this idea has been presented more notably by Silvio Torres-Saillant’s *El retorno de las yolas* (1999) and, most recently, by Nestor E. Rodríguez’s *Escrituras de desencuentro en la República Dominicana* (2005), with both vindicating the Dominican diaspora as an essential part of the configuration of Dominicaness. Similarly, in Puerto Rico, Juan Flores’ *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (2010) argues that the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States have facilitated the circular movement between the two spaces— which would bring to Puerto Rico not only technology, capital and commodities, but also cultural practices and identities of the diaspora. Yolanda Martínez San Miguel shares the same idea, but encompassing the whole

Hispanic Caribbean, in *Caribe Two Ways* (2003) when she proposes to think the nation, not from a historical perspective (as proposed by Benedict Anderson), but to include the place from which it is possible a reading of the Caribbean nations—which would include the culture of migration (17). Through the analysis of cultural materials produced in the Dominican, Puerto Rican and Cuban diasporas, Martínez San Miguel, however, takes the analysis a step forward suggesting the origin of a Caribbean subjectivity whose origin is the United States, rather than independent and self-regulating national identity particles (390-391). These identity reconfigurations are, as Clifford states, formed due to the shared histories “of colonization, displacement, and racialization” that form “the basis for coalitions” in diasporic settings (315). In the Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives produced in the diaspora these shared histories and Caribbean subjectivity can be spotted through the recurring thematic tropes the narratives collect. Aligned with the representation of the struggles of adaptation and settlement, economic hardships, and ethnoracial challenges, the narratives in the following chapters thematize and arrange themselves around the tropes of the *home* and the *family* structure, and its history/story. As such these narratives resort to autobiographies and fictions in which many of the stories follow a bildungsroman makeup in the migrant context.

This centrality of the *home* and *family* tropes observed in these narratives of the diaspora plays an important part in my analysis because of the links between them and the national narratives in the homeland. Muñoz Marín in Puerto Rico, and Trujillo in the Dominican Republic’s stay in power was cemented and relied upon the (now prosaic) motif of the *nation as a home*, along with the accompanying images of the *father* figure and the *family unit* in order to insert their respective countries into modernity. With this domestic configuration the normative discourses of race, gender, and sexuality were developed in consonance, shaping the narratives and ideologies of both nations. These paternalist forms of governance were institutionalized and

transferred to the imaginary of the nation's citizens and were, as it has been proven by many scholars, reproduced in numerous cultural productions of the time. Over the decades, subversive voices responded to these national narrative orders in other cultural productions. Two significant critical works that analyze these national discursive formations and their subversive literary responses are Juan Gelpí's *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* (1993) and, again, Néstor E. Rodríguez's *Escrituras de desencuentro en la República Dominicana* (2005). In the first one, Gelpí traces the construction of the literary canon in the 20th century-Puerto Rico as an extension of the metaphor of the nation as a home, arguing that critical classifications such as canon or literary generations prolong the paternalist and patriarchal discourses produced by power. By doing this, the author highlights the literary productions that do not conform to the interests of the powerful, and that were left outside of the metaphorical "home" and patriarchal structures. Similarly, Rodríguez traces the beginnings of the discourses that formed the ideology of the Trujillato in the Dominican Republic, also highlighting the contra-discursive narratives produced. For Rodríguez the nation as a home institution is represented in the form of a city in which the same metaphors of the father figure and family are reproduced recursively. Both authors trace the emergence of discourses that define the political structures of the state (with origins in the 19th century), discover their hegemonizing metaphors, and presents narratives that defy these power configurations.

For the purposes of this study, I see my analysis of disidentification through race, ethnicity, gender and cultural manifestations condensed under the phenomena of what I am calling the *discourses of the nuclear nation*. These discourses encompass the metaphor of the nuclear family (home-father-family) for a political/national agenda and include the discourses on race, ethnicity, gender, and culture. The prevalence of these discourses are not a particularity of Puerto Rican and Dominican politics or literatures and are a part of a thematic continuity

common to other national literatures that began to see the inoperability of these discourses of the nation. My attention in the following chapters is on the way in which these Puerto Rican and Dominican writers in the United States have reproduced these discourses of the nuclear nation to develop their own interpretations from a diasporic perspective. If on one hand, the narratives produced on the islands evolved to challenge the normative discourses of the nuclear nation; on the other, the Dominican and Puerto Rican diaspora narratives, I argue, borrow the same aesthetics (language/metaphors of the home/father/family) and adapt them to talk about their own preoccupations and adjust them to their needs. It can be argued that the reproduction of discourses of the nuclear nation is a response to United States hegemonic powers—the same way that other national literatures have produced their own subversive narratives as a result of local reconciliations of the national order. However, I contend that these reproductions are a literary display of displacement of customs, idiosyncrasies, and affective processes that take the same aesthetic forms in these diasporas. This exercise of delocalizing the discursive forms of the nuclear nation tropes presents some interesting aspects of the diasporic literary productions, their themes and their origins. My approach to disidentification within the *discourses of the nuclear nation* is focused on how these literary figures are managed in these diaspora narratives. As such, my analysis will focus on the concept of the *home in the diaspora* as representative of the nation (along with the discourses on race, ethnicity, gender, and culture), and the disidentification results they convey: destabilizing the literary representation of national discourses by deconstructing the home metaphors, deconstructing the family as unity, and focusing on the role or absence of the father figure as an agent of control in order to, in their case, achieve or get close to a diasporic identity.

Since my analysis focuses heavily on the representations of the home, the family and the father as epicenters of national discourses and how the narratives disidentify with them, it is

necessary to flesh out, briefly, the processes of what I will often call *heritage education*; a process in which individuals from newer migrant generations learn about their origins. Contrary to a *cultural education*, the ties between diaspora and homeland are built upon, among other things, economic relations, political associations, and emotional bonds that are necessary to develop forms of filiations that facilitate identification with the nation. These sets of acts included in a heritage education are prompted by a long history of social and cultural associations that develop and retain significant emotional attachments. Hence, the cultural and symbolic links facilitate individual and communal alliances that produce different forms of loyalties to the nation that one would expect, arguably, to strengthen over time. With no state surveillance and policing to promote the continuation of national narratives in the hostland, these loyalties have their place of origin at home, in the nuclear family, and the emotional ties, national connections, and perceptions of the country of origin are learned at differing levels through the education imparted by the first-generation migrants and transferred by them to newer generations (e.g. parents to their children). The heritage education that forms the homeland's engagement comprises, among other things, the idiosyncrasies, culture, imaginings, and history of the departed place, as well as the transmission of racial, sexual, and gender identity notions. In my analysis we will see that it is the literary representation of this heritage education that informs us of the discourses of the nuclear nation, as well as the way disidentification takes place in the dynamics of the familial groups within the larger hostland configurations.

Along with the representation of the heritage education lays the importance of knowing, recollecting or acknowledging the subject, family, community or ethnicity's history/story. This aspect constantly resonates within the personal and social constructions of the diasporic narratives. Glissant sees the relationship between literature and history in the post-colonial context as the *longing for the ideal history*, for which, he indicates, the writer obsessively

pursues in order to find the *primordial source* (79). For Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporic writers—primarily those who grew up or were born in the United States—this primordial source is located in the ancestral land and supposes a return to the origin (literal or symbolic) which, in many cases, involves a revision of the family story and, in others, a rewriting of the nation's history. Its representation takes the form of memories of the islands, remembrances from the parents, or personal experiences if they had traveled to the home countries. Particularly in the cases of Santiago and Díaz, this “obsession” is tightly linked to the need of knowing and understanding their heritage past and, in turn, the processing of this past aids in the character's adaptation and assimilation stages. Through this critical lens and in this context, it will be argued that these diasporic narratives produce a historiography that cannot be found in History, assuming an agency role in which historiography is diasporic and not necessarily insular. This is because what is being collected is the subjective experience brought about by identity tensions produced in the diaspora.

The textual elements I will be analyzing in this dissertation do not present definitive answers regarding the exit from a liminal state to a complete disidentification, instead, these narratives present such processes as they are being unfolded. In a literary context, disidentification presents the deterritorialization of cultural knowledge and identity politics, as it is being detached from the physical site of the nation, removed from the homogeneity of the homeland, and (re) produced and transformed in the new place. Diasporic narratives have often been read within the scope of critical analyses as neo- or post-colonial texts in order to deconstruct their relationship with their current environments. However, I argue that the narratives I will be analyzing do not speak of a post-colonial condition through the lens of dislocated subjects influenced by imperial power. Rather I position them beyond homeland borders as they, in my view, do not disclose the ambivalences of a (post) colonial discourse. In

other words, these subjects are not affected by the residues of colonialism. As I trace the development of a disidentificatory attitude, it will be apparent how these subjects recognize their place in the realm of their diaspora social reality. As such, I contend that these four narratives should be read as texts that go beyond post-coloniality. Rather, by being located at the heart of Empire (however marginalized they may be) they reinforce it by reproducing similar discourses of power whose Other are the respective homelands. This “othering” becomes the artifact that produces detachment with the homeland. In this sense, the subject does not only mimic an imperial subjectivity but, while positioned at the heart of the empire, he/she becomes “it” even when the subject places himself/herself in or out of it by sporadically locating their alliances in the country of origin. As this project will show, the representation of identity axes and cultural aspects from the country of origin are recollected, understood, processed, and interpreted by the subjects portrayed. Similarly, for some of the writers, *history*, whether colonial or not, seems to require a revision, discovering it as a problem that needs to be assessed.

My critical approach through disidentification advocates for a consideration in which the needs for history, culture, and rituals of homeland understandings are not informed by a fracture in the subject’s persona, whether that be national, ethnic or emotional. The desire for an understanding and knowledge of one’s past may reveal a sense of completion and resolution. This knowledge is not necessarily related to abrupt disruption or breakage with the homeland, nor it is a permanent and puzzling position of “in-betweenness.” The need to speak of these unresolved historical dialogues created by the tension of migration can be linked to the idea of any subject formation: one that connects the missing parts of subjective conflicts, which require the revision of historical pieces, their reflections and absorptions, before they are inserted as part of what conforms the intimacy of identity. In the transnational context, this results in a subject that has a past outside of his or her geographical position, but who is localized and not

necessarily displaced. This does not always inform a sense of split identity between homeland and diaspora because this activity of searching for one's national, ethnic, or racial past can, in itself, be understood as any other search in identity formation. We see this at work in the way a person of a lower economic class deals with the understanding of their socio-economic conditions, and is similar to the way a woman is aware of society's patriarchal and *machismo* structures, or the way a racially marked individual learns about his race in a society with racial hierarchies.

In the following four chapters I demonstrate how these dramas of migration show the work of diasporic writers as internal narratives of subject formation, and through them we will see how the markers which speak of disidentification are procedural and in continual operation. One of the problems when dealing with these complex topics, such as experiences and practices of the diaspora, is that its reification could lead to misinterpretations or essentializations of social behavior. In order to avoid this and sort out such processes I will be focusing on narratives from different periods and genres (memoir and fiction), as well as both Puerto Rican and Dominican migrant experiences. The presentation of the following chapter structures the representations of disidentification processes chronologically, focusing first on the Puerto Rican diaspora in chapters 1 and 2 (since it's the oldest diaspora) and then the Dominican Republic in chapters 3 and 4. It is my intention, with a sequential approach, to present and follow different disidentification phases as they gradually develop in different stages of the migration process.

In the first chapter, "Carving Identities in Writing: The Migrant *Jibara*, Gastronomy, Class, and Encounter with the United States in Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993)," I explore the author's narrative representation of her younger self as a Puerto Rican migrant, and the identity changes and nation perspective shifts brought upon dislocation. I am interested in discussing how cultural nationalism is represented in Santiago's memoir through the

construction of a national home, with particular attention paid to cultural affiliation as it is constructed in a diasporic context.

In chapter 2, “Etching Identities in Alien Turfs: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* (1967),” I examine the role multi-ethnic and multi-racial urban environments play in the development of diasporic subjectivities outside of the home and their impact on the subject’s national consciousness frameworks. I concentrate this analysis on the way different questions of gender, race and ethnicity in the diaspora are irrevocably linked to Puerto Rican national identity conflicts which take place simultaneously, thus turning Piri’s life in to a series of movements between multiple performances of identity.

Chapter 3, “(Re)Assembling Home in the Diaspora: Gendered Returns, Religion, and Patriarchy in Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* (1999),” includes my analysis of the different junctures in which the formulation of “home” reproduces Dominican national discourses and their reexaminations from members of different migrant generations. In Pérez’s novel we can see the completion of the foundation of “home” as constructed in the previous two chapters, here I examine how this model of the domestic environment is affected by patriarchy, religion, and the act of return.

In the final chapter, “Fictionalizing History: Comic Books, Fantasy, Sci-Fi, and the (Re) Articulation of the Past in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)” my attention is on the process of writing about the nation-as-ancestral land, and I argue that this process is a form in which discourses about nationness can be rewritten. In this chapter, I concentrate on the novel’s treatment of Dominican history through a particular language of American popular culture. I contend that this narrative strategy conveys a new figure of speech that unearths another way of understanding the migrant condition by preserving the past. My

analysis explores the need for history, not as condition of knowledge of the past, but rather as a vehicle that delineates difference with the homeland.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I return to disidentification as critical proposal. I emphasize how its analysis aids in deepening the understanding of diasporic identity formation. My study demonstrates how these writers' portrayals of subjects in the diaspora understand some cultural aspects of their heritage and how they rearticulate identity axes. These subjects are affected and afflicted by them at different levels and degrees, and that disturbs their engagement with their homelands. These engagements take many forms that vary depending on the individual along with the solidity and scope of their heritage education. Enclosed in the clash of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender conflicts, however, there lay affective residues which claim alternative forms of national identification in the context of the migrant experience.

NOTES

NOTES

¹ All subsequent translations in the remainder of the dissertation will be my own unless otherwise noted.

² As an example of the Dominican Republic there is Viriato Sención's *Los que falsificaron la firma de Dios* (1992) in which the author criticizes the racial discourses proposed by Joaquín Balaguer in his book *La isla al revés* where the African and Haitian racial component in the Dominican Republic is erased. In the Puerto Rican case there is the literature that was produced in tandem with the labor union movements in New York City. In addition to fighting for labor rights these unions also tackled issues concerning the island's political status. Writers such as Bernardo Vega in his *Memorias of Bernardo Vega* and Jesús Colón in *Puerto Rican Sketches* are representative of this group of authors whose literature presented a political conscience (of a socialist nature) of the Puerto Rican condition.

³ Berry argues that *acculturation* has become synonymous of *assimilation* even when he sees the latter as part of the acculturation process (8-9). For simplicity's sake, I will use both terms indiscriminately to refer to processes of adaptation in intercultural contacts that result in the loss of heritage items of the culture of origin.

⁴ The economic and educational demographics of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in the United States have been changing in the 21st century with the increase in migration that has diversified the migrant's profile. Contemporary Dominican diaspora is primarily working class rather than middle class or peasantry, as opposed to the post-Trujillo years (Duany 60). Similarly, the Puerto Rican migrants continue to work as blue-collar and service workers in the New York City area. However, middle class and professionals constitute the new groups as migration expanded geographically to South Florida (Duany 54).

⁵ Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994); Stuart Hall's *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990); Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), and Néstor García Canclini's *Culturas Híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1989).

⁶ See Valdés, Guadalupe. "Ethnolinguistic identity The challenge of maintaining Spanish-English." *Bilingual Youth: Spanish in English-speaking societies* 42 (2011): 113. Also, Valdés, Guadalupe, ed. *Developing minority language resources: The case of Spanish in California*. Vol. 58. Multilingual Matters, 2006.

⁷ In this project I refer to Puerto Rico as a neo-colony regardless of the current political relationship of the island with the United States. The conflict brought by this relationship, which in many academic areas is still a matter of debate, remains because in some aspects Puerto Rico is neither/either recognized as a colony or as a nation in its own right. Some scholars have even dubbed Puerto Rico as a post-colonial colony (Flores 2008) but I ascribe to the description of it as neo-colonial considering Puerto Rico's cultural nationalism (Negrón-Muntaner and

Grosfoguel 1997). In this sense, I concur with Jorge Duany's statement that "Most scholars no longer question whether Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States" (82).

⁸ Initially, Puerto Rico was invaded by the United States in 1898 and, in the 20th century, the Dominican Republic faced two American military occupations: from 1916 to 1924, and then in 1965-1966.

⁹ For a detailed description of the Puerto Rican and Dominican migration to the United States refer to Jorge Duany's *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (2011).

¹⁰ Ramon Soto Crespo's "An Intractable Foundation: LMM and the borderland state in contemporary Puerto Rican literature" presents a short, but concise history of LMM and the role the Jibaro figure played in his political ideals.

¹¹ José Luis González *El país de cuatro pisos y otros ensayos*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Huracán, 1980. Silvio Torres-Saillant. *Introduction to Dominican Blackness*. New York, N.Y. : CUNY Dominican Studies Institutes, City College of New York, 1999.

¹² Because of the increasing number of people who are migrating to the United States, and because at this moment in time there are more Puerto Ricans in the U.S. than on the island, two proposals were presented to the Puerto Rican senate in 2014 in order to encourage the return of the Puerto Rican migrants. The first one, *Día del Puertorriqueño Ausente*, proposes a holiday in which the government will acknowledge the diaspora and invite its members back to this festivity in Puerto Rico in order to strengthen the bonds that links both communities (M. Acosta). The other proposal, the "Law to Stimulate the Return of the Puerto Rican Diaspora," aims to confer tax incentives to Puerto Ricans who decide to return (Gómez).

¹³ I refer mostly to popular culture events in which Puerto Ricans or Dominicans in the diaspora receive a positive response from the United States and these are welcomed and celebrated on the islands. For example, when Puerto Rican artists like Marc Anthony or Jennifer López, or athletes such as baseball players like David Ortiz and Alex Rodriguez are exalted for their performance in their respective areas. Also, in the arts, cases like author Junot Diaz and Esmeralda Santiago, whose literature has been celebrated in Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico respectively.

CHAPTER ONE

Carving Identities in Writing: The Migrant *Jibara*, Gastronomy, Class, and Encounter

with the United States in Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was*

Puerto Rican (1993)

“In writing the book I wanted to get back to that feeling
of Puertoricanness I had before I came here” (278)
-Esmeralda Santiago, “Note to the Reader”
When I was Puerto Rican (2006 edition).

What form do memories of the place of origin take when a subject migrates? How are those memories encoded and retrieved? What forms does writing about the homeland take? How does a feeling of nationness—or “Puertoricanness” as the epigraph above states—get manifested into the narrative of a migrant writer?

In the prologue that opens Esmeralda Santiago's first memoir, *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993), we encounter an adult Negi (Santiago's representation of her younger self) at a supermarket in the United States holding a guava in her hand. At that moment the guava is not just a fruit but a reminder of her childhood in Puerto Rico: the days when she would go to the yard, grabbed guavas from a tree and ate them ripe and natural. This seemingly innocuous act would not have had much importance if it were not due to Santiago's reflection as she held it. For critics, the power that memories of the place of origin plays in migration narratives lies in their capacity to recreate a former life that can be used to analyze the multiplicity of conflicts the subject confronts upon migrating. Depending on the narrative's context, these memories can disclose better times in comparison to their new place of settlement, but they also can discover the scars that speak of both past and present conflicts that are a result of dislocation. In this chapter we will see how in Santiago's memoir her childhood remembrances represent more than

a recollection of the past. The act of holding the guava in itself speaks of conflicts of national identity and cultural dislocations that continue in her adult life. Migrant memories such as this provide a window for us to see how diaspora identities are shaped and reconfigured through the narration of memory.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the vast literature that deals with Puerto Rican migration to the United States has produced different voices in which we can examine migrant identities. In general, this literature does not assume that national identity, gender identity, cultural identity, racial and/or ethnic identity can be described in singular terms. For women writers the conflicts that are created upon migration to the United States are more complex due to gender implications. These subjects are confronting racial, ethnic, and cultural dislocation in addition to learning to navigate new gendered and patriarchal boundaries in the place of settlement. Anita Mannur has stated that for the diasporic exilic writer, there exists the inevitability of a distorted idealized memory in which “owing to the exigencies of displacement and dislocation certain memories are remembered, while others, literally, are re-membered” (12). In this chapter I will focus on this assembling nature of memories as they are narrated by the diasporic writer. In the case of Esmeralda Santiago, these memories are filtered by the writer’s time and personal experiences of the place where this writing takes place: the United States. As such, I argue, the memoir format allows the author to revise her life pre-migration, in which she reassesses cultural symbols of the homeland. I contend that this “re-membering,” as Mannur calls it, not only defines Santiago’s cultural understandings of the homeland, but also detach (disidentify) them of their original connotations because they have adopted, over time, new significant meanings.

Presently, Esmeralda Santiago (born in 1948) has written three memoirs that expose her life as a migrant in the United States. *When I was Puerto Rican*, the first of these memoirs,¹ focuses on Negi's upbringing in the town of Macún in Puerto Rico and later, in the last chapters, her migration to New York. Her childhood in Puerto Rico is concerned with poverty, the movement from house to house, and from the countryside to the city. Her depiction of life in New York presents the traditional tropes that are common in narratives of migration: economic concerns, challenges of cultural adaptation, and conflicts with identity. Scholarship about this memoir has concentrated on the topics of the production of "failed allegories" during exile (Sánchez González), processes of exoticism of the other (Aponte Ramos), self-construction and negative self-perception of the past (Gatto), assimilation in bi-ethnic spaces (Szadziuk), and as "borderland literature" that seeks the rhetorical dissolution of political and social boundaries by binding the Caribbean with U.S. Latino literature (Stephens). Other critics, like Amanda Baron-Frits and Ellen C. Mayock analyze Santiago from the perspective of identity formation. Baron-Frits identifies in her work a process of "altering identities" that permit a new level of understanding of the place of settlement which prepare her to confront the economic, ethnic and racial dynamics in the United States (34). For this critic, this process of identity "alteration" also includes stages of erasure of particular components of identity that makes the author more acceptable to the hostland (36).² Similarly, Ellen C. Mayock states that in Santiago's memoir the processes of identity formation are defined predominantly by the movement between different cultural locations resulting in the production of multiple "selves" that aims to break with old codes of cultural norms for women (223). The critical focus on identity on the part of these critics (Gatto; Szadziuk; Baron-Frits; Mayock) arises through the understanding of hybrid migrant identities that, in Santiago's memoir, originates from her inability to accept "both sides

of the hyphenated, hybrid, creolized Puerto Rican-American identity” according to Keith A. Sprouse (116). In this chapter, I argue that the failure to accept a hybrid configuration of identity is not a problem for Santiago because her memoir presents processes of disidentification with Puerto Rico that speak of a larger formation of new diasporic sensibilities and identity. Because Santiago dedicates most of her attention in her memoir to her life in Puerto Rico before migration, my analysis will consist of two parts that are not independent from each other.

The first part of my analysis concentrates on Santiago’s narration of her life in Puerto Rico because I find intriguing the author’s construction of her Puerto Rican identity. This is evident in the epigraph that serves as a header to this chapter, which comes from the “Notes to the Reader” of the 2006 edition of *When I was Puerto Rican*. In this epigraph, Santiago acknowledges her act of writing as an exercise aimed to recover a feeling that she has lost and, in turn, it becomes a process of reorganization of those feelings. In that quote “here,” (the United States) opposes Puerto Rico—a place that has transcended to an emotion and is no longer a physical place; it is an affective state for which she longs. I would like to emphasize the importance of this “longing” because I believe that the power of remembering embedded in Santiago’s writing contextualizes the way in which she will structure her experience. Amanda Holmes describes Santiago as borrowing “fictional narrative strategies to shape geographical sites of their personal histories into symbols and metaphors for the construction of an identity” (110). Similar to this critic, I see Santiago’s memoir as more than a telling of her life in a lineal description of cultural identifications and more of a complex re-telling narrative with a writing strategy. In other words, I see Negi’s coming of age and subsequent move to New York not chronologically but from Santiago’s point of view as a writer who is looking back at her life. Approaching the memoir this way allows for a study of Santiago as an author who is trying to

make sense of the acculturation processes she went through by way of using national and cultural symbols, and metaphors to construct a Puerto Rican identity. I will argue that Santiago's writing allows for the development of an identity that creates a national subject (a subject with a nationality) through an analysis of two cultural elements in Santiago's narrative: food and the figure of the jíbaro (the Puerto Rican peasant and mountain dweller).

As we will see, the carving of a Puerto Rican identity through narration in this first part of the memoir is tightly linked to processes of disidentification which, as I posited in the Introduction, are diverse processes of discrimination in which different aspects of identity are categorized, classified, dismissed, or accepted. An analysis of the writing mechanisms employed by Santiago has been overlooked by critics who had favor instead the study of the transition (or merging) of one cultural identity into another. As such, these analyses disregard Santiago's presentation of *puertorriqueñidad* [Puerto Ricanness] as an assembly filtered by adulthood and nostalgia. Analyzing these writing mechanisms is important because her presentation of *puertorriqueñidad* is a construction that serves the purposes of creating a national background in her writing. Santiago's concern of building a past is related to the need of understanding her roots within the context of threatened subjectivities due to migration. I argue that his Puerto Rican identity construction, as a strategy, confirms an appropriation of *puertorriqueñidad* once she accepts herself as an acculturated and/or assimilated subject in the diaspora. The analysis of Negi's life in Puerto Rico provides an outline for the presentation of different items that represent nation and culture after migration for the author. As such, her memoir is an excellent template through which we can see the transition from identification to disidentification.

In the second part of my analysis I focus on Negi's life in New York and the role this Puerto Rican identity articulation plays when she enters and encounters the United States.

Because I see Santiago's writing as an exercise of identity development, this allows her to position herself in a space where cultural heritage and national identification are bound to negotiate. As such I analyze how the cultural memories of food and the jíbaro that she represented about her life pre-migration are rationalized, and I examine how they evolve to represent traces of disidentification. According to Miguel Algarín, the first-generation of Puerto Rican migrants in the 1930s and 1940s "boldly and heroically maintained the family traditions intact as they could;" however, subsequent generations (like Santiago's) were "stripped of all historical consciousness" impeding a cultural continuity (89-90). For this critic, detachment from cultural and historical continuity is related to the reality Puerto Rican migrants confront upon their arrival in the United States. Algarín sees this reality as rooted in the "debris of the ghettos," and the dependence on manual labor that resulted in a loss of trust of the system (90). On this part I argue that consequences of living in the "debris of the ghettos" influences the formation of Santiago's diasporic identity as she struggles to adapt not only to the ethnic and racial dynamics of the United States social system, but also to socio-economic discrepancies between migrants and the rest of the American society. As a result, the author portrays a migrant experience that overlooks an in depth representation of racial and ethnic problems in the diaspora, and centers heavily on her personal journey towards a life outside of poverty. I content that this theme of class differences and upward social mobility will inform Santiago's life post-migration. As a result, her place in the class hierarchy brought by the lack of economic progress will take a central role in her narrative, leaving behind the national identity she created in writing while in Puerto Rico.

The prologue to Santiago's memoir is titled: "How to Eat a Guava," and presents an adult Negi at a "Shop & Save" supermarket in the United States looking at a display containing these

tropical fruits. As mentioned before, the description of the moment becomes a nostalgic meditation of her childhood and a reflection that romanticizes her memories of Puerto Rico, with pride and perhaps cultural superiority (Marshall 47). This cultural superiority is established when she offers a careful description of the fruit and the differences between the one she has in her hand and the ones she used to eat as a child, which grew organically in her yard on the island. What is interesting about this prologue is its title because it opens the memoir with an interrogation that is not posed as an inquiry but, rather, as an example designed to promote a specific type of knowledge. By proposing “How to Eat a Guava,” the author presents a guide to a “problem” in which the reader is uninformed. If a “how-to” is, implicitly, a guide which presents a simplified design in order to lend assistance in the process of understanding a particular system; what is the author trying to simplify? What is this organization to which she is referring? More importantly, if a “how-to” guide defines the contours of a structured arrangement: what exactly is the relationship between the fruit (gastronomy) and the author?

I argue that this “how-to” metaphor offers the blueprints of how to read the memoir as a text in which conflicts of identity construction take place. This reading is possible if we consider the politicizing character that food plays in national and cultural identity processes. In “‘Boast Now, Chicken, Tomorrow You’ll Be Stew’: Pride, Shame, Food, and Hunger in the Memoirs of Esmeralda Santiago,” Joanna Barszewska Marshall has noted the prevalence of food as a cultural item in Santiago’s three memoirs. For this critic, the presence of food items have a particular resonance for Santiago’s understanding of the nation as it relates to her ambivalent position about class, gender, and ethnicity. This ambiguity, Marshall suggests, is clarified if we read the three memoirs following the representation of Puerto Rican cuisine as a continuity that is cohesive, and that relates to cultural identification with Puerto Rico that take place alongside

acculturation in the United States. Marshall draws from Frances Negrón-Muntaner's theorization that the Puerto Rican efforts to value themselves (national *Boricua* pride)³ has its origin in a sense of *shame* (or colonial shame) that do not result from an inferiority complex but from social identities generated by conflict within asymmetrical relations of power (48).⁴ In Marshall's reading, Santiago "speaks her vexed relationship to issues of pride and shame via her vexed relationship to food and food practices" (49) which allows her to liberate this pride constituted by shame—a shame that is associated with being Puerto Rican and female. I bring Marshall's reading in to my discussion of this "how-to" metaphor in order to provide an example of how Santiago politicizes the guava by relating it to issues of national identity formation. Similarly, in *When I was Puerto Rican*, rather than defining culture with intangibles, Santiago gives us something discernible—embodied in the guava as well as other items—in which we can associate nation and culture and trace them as political entities as they develop in her story.

Throughout her memoir, Santiago sporadically mentions different items linked to Puerto Rican customs, culture, idiosyncrasies, and practices that presumably only people from the island would be able to identify. Even though these items are scattered throughout the memoir, this configuration should not be considered haphazard since in many instances they are intentionally highlighted in italics and/or are presented in Spanish.⁵ I classify these items in five different groups with food leading the list due to its prevalence in the narrative: food, traditions, nature, jargons and/or sayings, and institutional symbols.⁶ Of the five, I will concentrate my analysis on the representation of the first (food), and in the institutional symbols (predominantly through the representation of the national symbol of the *jibaro*). Even when I will not be discussing the remaining three, I see all of them as part of an ensemble that recreate in writing the framework of a Puerto Rican consciousness developed from Santiago's adulthood. In my view, they form an

axiomatic grip that command profound emotional cultural and national links for the author. In other words, I see this compilation of cultural items as a process of classification that composes the body of the “Puerto Ricanness” she strives for when writing her story—as she alluded in this chapter’s epigraph. I argue that Santiago begins to compose a dictionary of cultural particles that represent Puerto Rico from her point of view from/in the diaspora. This act aids her in imagining the national and cultural landscapes that she beckons define *puertorriqueñidad* in order to create a model of a Puerto Rican identity. By doing so, Santiago, from adulthood, builds a national sentiment that structures the construction of the imagined community she knew as a child, before migration. Through the “How-to” metaphor, Santiago places the guava as the opening item of her chapter in order to reconstruct the nation, but also uses it as the primary representative of this collection of items because of the guava’s tropical and subtropical origin, as well as its nativeness to Latin America. In this sense, the guava—topping the list of other gastronomic items—becomes a symbol of ethnic origin that denotes both the link with the homeland as well as the ethnic conflicts brought by migration.

Similar to my reading of the guava, Holmes has examined the fruit in the memoir as an item that is relevant to identity formation. For the author, the guava works as “an example of the manipulation of spatial elements ... in which locative and topographical images intersect with memory and history to generate definitions of self” (110). However, I argue that the symbolic meanings encoded in the guava and other gastronomic items go well beyond the definition of “self” and encompass other political meanings if we consider that as a cultural item, a country’s cuisine has a prominent place in the catalogue of images that define the nation for a migrant. For example, Anita Mannur has examined the affective and discursive place of food in narratives of migration indicating that the desire to remember home through culinary memories “cannot be

understood merely as reflective nostalgic gestures” (13) The author coins the term “culinary citizenship” in order to refer to the value of food references as an expression of national essences over their symbolic or semiotic meanings (13). Similarly, Psyche Williams-Forsson posits it simply: “Powerfully symbolic in its ability to communicate, food conveys messages about where we come from, who we are as individuals, and how we think and feel at any given moment” that are problematized when they are linked to identity and place. For Williams-Forsson, this presents food as “a critical expression of cultural identity and an important marker of cultural borders” (437). Following this same interpretation, Brinda Mehta, theorizes that food encodes “an entire semiotic system of political, cultural, and social significations” (35).

Following these interpretations, I see the representation of the guava as a metonymy of the Puerto Rican identity Santiago is trying to convey. This representation begins when Negi’s past in Puerto Rico is extrapolated to the fruit she is holding at the “Shop & Save”: “It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hopscotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I’m no longer a child” (4). While the guava brings childhood memories, it also helps to situate the narrator in the present, letting the reader know that she is writing from adulthood in New York, drawing a line between past and present while highlighting a former life. From the onset, the memoir provides a glimpse of one of the memoirs thematic conflicts: Negi’s position between Puerto Rico and United States. Moreover, the language used to describe the guava’s physical qualities transforms the passage into a figurative narrative wherein the guava becomes a symbolic signified object, not only of Negi’s childhood, but of *origin* overall. For example, the emphasis placed on the description of the fruit’s seeds at the center, its skins and surfaces, and the fruit’s growth in the ground (3-4) suggests it as something that represents the root and product of the country.

Similar to the way the narration offers this glimpse of the boundary created by her position between Puerto Rico and New York, the prologue also provides glimpses of Negi's in-between stance in the present. The moment in which she is about to buy or eat the fruit, after a lengthy description of it and the appropriate way of eating it, she rejects it, stating: "The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, towards the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet" (4). Her inability to eat, and/or refusal to buy the guava, highlights a political stance suggesting an impossibility contracted through physical and psychological dislocation. As a figurative form of cultural anthropophagy, eating the guava would have indicated either association (a return to the roots) or, at the very least, would have implied cultural hybridity (if cultural syncretism is the result in Negi's dislocation). The guava of "her childhood," works as a reference that is replaced by the "apples and pears of my adulthood" reflecting the impossibility of a complete return-to-national-identity brought by her inability to eat the guava or take it with her.

The conflict of Santiago's identity as a subject in a place "in-between" is summarized by the often-commented memoir's title. The use of the past tense in the title suggests a change in state, and pronounces a transition and mutability that reveals a conversion from being Puerto Rican into something else. However, if we discuss the memoir's Spanish edition—a translation created by Santiago (C. Hernández 160)—the title *Cuando era puertorriqueña* (1994) creates a distinctive and interesting meaning. Here the use of the imperfect tense 'era' (which has no English translation), instead of the past tense 'fui' [was], references a continuing or habitual state that is not a completed one, as the past tense would imply. This verb preference gives her Puerto Ricanness a continuity that has no beginning and no end. As such, Santiago's memoir can be

seen as an exploration of these oscillations caused by the struggles of identification. An example of the depth of these identity oscillations is presented when the author indicates that she left the guava in “the exotic fruit display” (4). As Dolores Aponte Ramos has analyzed in her article “Recetario para el novelar híbrido,” this could well mean a critique of the typical market-oriented exoticism of the other. As readers, however, we do not have enough context to determine if Negi is making a point about the “alluring nature” of the other (as seen by power demands) or if she shares this same view of exoticism. Either way, the fruit on “display” suggests an external gaze that establishes a relationship of awareness between her position in the diaspora and the fruit as nation/culture. Describing the fruit as “exotic” reveals an ontological value that speaks of cultural otherness, which began its development the moment she ate her last guava the day she left Puerto Rico (4).

In the prologue, Santiago begins her memoir by describing the distance between herself and Puerto Rico: observing this distance in the form of a fruit, admiring in the form of a long lost memory. In order to understand the oscillations of identity that her dislocation supposes, Santiago—as a writer—first must circumnavigate the contours of her childhood and define her understandings of nationness and culture. I argued above that Santiago does this by providing cultural suggestions beyond the fruit, offering references of how such an identity is assembled. The finished product of this organization is presented by Roberto Strongman as a “*recollection* of fragments” loosely connected by vignettes that render its organization as more thematic rather than chronological and are only given coherence through narration (101-02). What Strongman sees as a loose connection; I see as a systematic assembly arranged under the “How-to” metaphor that the author proposes in the prologue. It is in this narrative image of the “How-to”

guide, with the guava leading the other cultural items listed, in which national identity is constructed, culture is rooted, and nationness consciousness is produced.

The canonization of these symbolic items that define *puertorriqueñidad* for Santiago are, however, limited or incomplete because of her class. This attention to socio-economic class is an aspect of identity that plays an important part of her assimilation and the acculturation processes at the end of the memoir. In Santiago's definition of *puertorriqueñidad*, class is relevant because the author only collects items that are limited due to her strained economic upbringing. That is, what “to be Puerto Rican” is for her, is represented through items with which she will be familiar as a person in the lower strata of the class hierarchy. All these items, in this sense, should not be considered as encompassing of all Puerto Rican identities because they are formed by subjective experiences that vary depending on the migrant’s location within identity and class politics. Due to her location at the bottom of class hierarchies, her articulation of a Puerto Rican identity through these items can be read as the collection of voices that are subjugated by normative structures of power. Similarly, the diversity of the culinary items she describes can be read as encompassing and underlying messages of the collective culinary history of Puerto Rican gastronomy that blends cuisines from countries of the African continent, Spain, and native Taíno and Arawaks. Even when Santiago does not necessarily reflect on the long history of culinary histories from which these were appropriated—which limits her take on gastronomy as a diverse historical agent—her portrayal of food is organic and lineal, giving it a sense of innateness, thus binding their individual histories through hybridity. We can then say, metaphorically, that the author is speaking of hybrid processes that also take place in Puerto Rico. This metaphor allows Santiago to ascertain that her place of origin is not exempt from the circumstances that promote these liminal configurations of identity. Bridging together hybrid items which work as native

referents aids Santiago in her proposal; that identities can be built or shaped by different traditions, thus creating different versions of the same identity. This, I argue, is the ultimate resolution at the end of the memoir.

Addressing the nature of national identity Benedict Anderson said that “in everything ‘natural’ there is always something unchosen.” For him this explains why nationness, as a relevant part of identity, is similar to race and gender because, as he puts it, they form part of “all those things one can not help” but being (143). Here, the innateness Anderson places on nationness when he compares it to race and gender speak of the subject’s inherent relationship with a nation that becomes endemic to identity. This is why it is “natural” and “unchosen,” and a part of the self. If, like food, all the items Santiago compiles as collective knowledge representing the nation are *unchosen*—because they existed and were represented in culture during her development from a child into an adult—one must question why the author is *choosing* what items to highlight. The way I see it, assembling these cultural elements and their placement as symbols that define her culture underscores the nativeness of nationness, the innateness and localization of those things she cannot actually help but *be*. From the perspective of a migrant writer, the act of cataloguing cultural referents when writing about the nation brings to mind the imaginative character of nation construction. Anderson’s proposal of the nation as an imagined community builds on Ernest Gellner’s notion that “[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (169). As Santiago’s narrative genre, the memoir, with its *bildungsroman* structure, allows for more than a formation of national consciousness; it also permits the building of cultural items, thus “inventing” a national construction. Santiago’s understanding of the nation and the items that represent it, defines the development of her younger self, Negi, as a body that it is intrinsically (and

nationally) Puerto Rican. The construction of this national Puerto Rican subject has, I propose, a clear objective: to understand the conflicts brought by dislocation once Negi moves to New York. In other words, without a clearly defined history of Negi's life in Puerto Rico, the author would not be able to visibly present the ambivalences, questioning, and restructuring of homeland paradigms that define personal conflicts after migration.

Santiago's goal to preserve a Puerto Rican identity through the narration of her life story is more explicitly presented when she transitions from an examination of the guava in the prologue to the first chapter, linking gastronomy with a specific national symbol. The chapter is introduced with an epigraph stating "*Al jíbaro nunca se le quita la mancha de plátano*" [*A jíbaro can never wash away the stain of the plantain*] (7). This epigraph highlights the author's practice of opening chapters with Puerto Rican aphorisms as epigraphs. This particular saying links one of the main staples of Puerto Rican cuisine (el plátano) with the image of the *jíbaro* (the Puerto Rican peasant or mountain dweller). In this introduction Santiago shifts away from cultural representations embodied through food to an actual institutionalized symbol; thus furthering the development of national identity construction.

For decades, the symbol of the *jíbaro* in Puerto Rican literature and literary criticism was the subject of many cultural debates. The figure of the *jíbaro* as a fundamental symbol of *puertorriqueñidad* originated in the mid 1800s with the publication of Manuel Alonso's *El jíbaro* (1849) and the subsequent writing projects of mostly white, educated and, interestingly, migrant Puerto Ricans.⁷ The resulting emblematic representation was, as Carmen Torres-Robles indicates, accidental since Alonso and the writers who preceded him created involuntarily the *jíbaro* as an iconic symbol of Puerto Rican nationality (244). From then on, the *jíbaro* as a national symbol evolved in culture allowing different writers, cultural and literary critics to

assess its development over time. In contemporary scholarship the figure of the jíbaro has been understood as a discursive project of the Puerto Rican elite, which has used it for various social and political purposes. In a political context, for example, the perpetuation of the image of the jíbaro as a unifying national identity has been understood as one that has resisted the conflicts brought about by Puerto Rican nationalism and the neocolonialism perpetuated by the United States. Critically, it has been understood that the very origin of the figure represents the hegemonic historiography of the colonial Caribbean and the perpetuation of European racism.⁸ By naming her first chapter “Jíbara,” Santiago places herself within the history and discourses of national iconography and, as such, problematizes the representation of her cultural project of *puertorriqueñidad*. Discussing the usage of this symbol in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Ramón Soto-Crespo has indicated that “[t]he figure of the *jíbaro* functions in the memoir as an ambiguous sign for national identity” and adds that “[a]lthough idealized, the *jíbaro* represents a past reality that requires overcoming; thus, national identification gets tied to a historical figure whose cultural location is decidedly transitional” (“Intractable” 724-25). These historical, cultural, and political contexts represented by the jíbaro, legitimize, at the same time, Santiago’s identity project as “native.” By placing it within the discoured structures of power used to build national ideologies, it constitutes another item of cultural, social, and institutionalized representation.

Different from the representation of gastronomic items, the presentation of the jíbaro in the memoir is more than an entry in the catalog of cultural items collected. I argue that the author places the jíbaro at the center of her narrative and uses it to talk about identity developments. These representations start when the author introduces the jíbaro as it has been nostalgically defined, in a very generalized way, by Puerto Rican society. Negi indicates that on the morning

radio show the family listened to, the jíbaro was represented as living “a life of struggle and hardship” whose self was “rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature couple with a respect for its intractability, and deeply rooted and proud nationalism” (12). This vision of the jíbaro would become Negi’s reference for national identity, a wish she would internalize as a way of living and life philosophy. The reproduction of this vision of the jíbaro begins in Santiago the construction of her own national history in which the jíbaro features as a figure whose rooted nationalism clashes with three main identity problems she faces from adulthood: that of being a *Puerto Rican woman of color* in the United States. By tackling these personal aspects of identity Santiago also criticizes the structure of the normative national discourses in which the jíbaro is commonly white and male. As such, Santiago deals with two identity treatments of the jíbaro that have been scarcely tackled in literature: the jíbaro as female, and the jíbaro as a black subject. I refer to these two representations as being scarce and rare since; to my knowledge, the presentation of the jíbaro in Puerto Rican literature have not had a black woman jíbaro as a main protagonist in any narrative.⁹ Two particular cases always stand out in critical literature when it comes to the dealings of the black heritage component in Puerto Rico: that of the poetry of Luis Palés Matos, and José Luis González’s essays and narrative work, were there has been black “criollos.”¹⁰ Santiago is able to create a narrative harmony within the conflict of her identity starting with a redefinition of the jíbaro figure: First, by switching its gender and by inserting herself as an individual that fits within the national symbol's discourse. At the beginning of her memoir she states: “I wanted to be a *jíbara* more than anything in the world” (12). Her desire “to be” was maimed by the urban/rural dichotomies that define the class poles in which the jíbaro, as a subject, is located at the low end because of his residence in the countryside. This idea is supported when her mother tells her that she cannot

be a jíbaro because she was born in the city (12). This leads Negi to the realization that “*jíbaros* were mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect” (12) and were, as such, marginalized. However derogatory this may be, Negi desires to be a jíbara and wonders why her and her family were not considered as such when they “live[d] like them,” in a house that was “shaped like a *bohío*, the kind of house *jíbaros* lived in” (12).

By way of this reflection Santiago applies the identity of the jíbaro to herself and in addition places the jíbaro figure inside the domestic environment instead of the outside (following the traditional representation of the jíbaro as a sugar cane worker). As I mentioned in the Introduction of this dissertation, I see the representation of domestic environments (houses, and the concept of home) in the context of migration literature as a template for the reproduction and transmission of cultural and national ideologies. In the same discussion, I mentioned that the national discourses that form *la gran familia* metaphor are similarly revised and rewritten through the articulation of *home* in the diaspora. Jamil Khader theorizes that this rewriting of the home and nation is a fundamental topos in Puerto Rican women’s writing because women can never experience a genuine sense of *home* anywhere, due in part to the relationship of their gender and colonization, racism, patriarchal oppression and other national ideologies (63). According to Khader this condition of “homelessness” is experienced in both the insular and metropolitan (read diaspora) contexts. Furthermore, in the diaspora, this is a result of women’s gender and class identities, which mark them as others and second-class citizens (64). I will be discussing how the concept of home is treated by Santiago in the diaspora context later in this chapter in order to see how it evolves from Puerto Rico to New York. First, it is important to see how the concept of home is represented while Negi was in Puerto Rico. In this context the environment surrounding the house was paradisiacal: “a miraculous garden with legs and arms

and a melody”—even when the house was broken and threatened to collapse (7-8). In addition, the atmosphere of the house was not positive for children rearing since Negi’s parents argued constantly in front of their children, because of her mother’s continuous challenging of her father’s household rulings. Her mother’s behavior initiates the breakage of the home, and of the house as a “girl-woman’s location,” disarticulating female domesticity and confronting the boundaries of female/male behaviors (Mayock 226). By situating her family in a house that was analogous to those of the jíbaros, and revisiting it as one in decay and with an unpleasant atmosphere, Santiago rewrites the metaphorical national home. In doing so, the author provides another layer of texture to the jíbaro symbol by unmasking the ideal image created in its discursive form and, at the same time, presenting the disarticulation of hierarchies. Through this representation of the jíbaro home, Santiago reformulates the jíbaro discourse as one that is inclusive because it incorporates (and associates to) non-jíbaro members.

This description of the home and the discussion of rural and urban dichotomies of the jíbaro allow Santiago to further the development of the symbol by introducing female characters, like Doña Lola (12), as jíbaras. Santiago’s intention to provide a female representation of a jíbaro may be due to the fact that, as an author, she likes to write for female readers, and is very deliberate about writing for women, not “caring” about men reading her work (C. Hernández 160). This is evident in the portrayal of female subjects in the memoir, wherein she describes the traditional roles associated with women from the point of view of male subjects: victims of patriarchy and subjected to the domestic environment (194-95). Santiago's response is to represent female subjects (like her mother and herself) whose independence disarticulates the absurdity of these outdated associations imposed on women. This female agency also provides a native reference of her past when she presents her own lineage stemming from the jíbaro

tradition: through the representation of the grandmother, whose characteristic of sedentary and calm mirrors that of the jíbaro representation on the radio (12-13). The popular saying used as epigraph at the beginning of the memoir's first chapter, "*Al jíbaro nunca se le quita la mancha de plátano*" (7) represents the nuanced vision of the jíbaro: its social backwardness and perception of its uncivilized character, and its cultural symbolic position. These nuances aid in allowing Santiago's claim of national identity, with the epigraph serving as well as a legitimizing aphorism of Negi's Puerto Rican past by way of validating her national roots through her *jíbaroness*.

The same way Santiago manages the gendered representation of the jíbaro, the author also responds to the white-washed image of the symbol in Puerto Rican narratives by subtly introducing a black jíbaro in Don Berto: a secondary "character" who exists in the narrative only in a couple of paragraphs. To introduce a black jíbaro in 1993 may not have had the same effect as it did in the 1930s and/or 1980s when Luis Palés Matos and José Luis González challenged the prevalence of the Hispanic heritage in the dominant discourses with their works. Nonetheless, Santiago's black jíbaro becomes subversive in nature because it unveils the continued preoccupation of Puerto Rican writers with the erasure of the African past in discourse. What is daring in Santiago's treatment of this black jíbaro is the speed with which this character emerges and disappears from the story. Santiago first introduces him as the grandfather of Negi's friend Juanita, and describes him as having a machete and no teeth. His hands and fingers show his condition as a worker as they were "stained with age and soil" (49). Also, Don Berto is presented as an uneducated and superstitious figure, as Juanita and Negi "would sit at his feet listening to his *jíbaro* tales of phantasms, talking animals, and enchanted guava trees"

(49). After this quick description, Negi is informed that Don Berto has died and she and Juanita had been chosen to lead the procession to the cemetery.

In the story of Don Berto we are encountered with three fascinating aspects of his representation. First, Santiago relies on the stereotype of the jíbaro as an uneducated hard working individual, which reproduces the description of the jíbaro in discourse. The second aspect of his representation pertains to his placement two generations away from Negi. Even when Negi has self-identified as a jíbara, there is a generational distance between her and Don Berto that speak of different portrayals of the jíbaro figure. The third aspect relates to his sudden death and subsequent burial. Negi observes that during the procession “men took off their hats and bowed their heads and women crossed themselves” as a sign of respect. For Negi “the world was still” and she felt “empty” (52). I see this episode in Santiago’s story as a symbolic representation in the burial of what could be considered *the last jíbaro*. However, the death of the cultural significance of the jíbaro is not completely understood by Negi at this age; she indicates that she could not understand Juanita’s sadness since she had never lost someone, but she “took on her grief as if it were” hers and “tried it on to see if [she] could feel anything for the old man who had made [her] so happy with his tales and the hypnotizing movement of his machete across the stone” (52). By placing herself in the group of people who are taking the jíbaro to his last resting place, Santiago represents the cultural shift of a symbol that has physically disappeared from society as a result of industrialization, but also a figure that is slowly disappearing as a cultural symbol in the collective psyche of younger generations. In this passage we are shown the nostalgic aspects of the jíbaro’s death—“what a good man he was and how he didn’t deserve to die” (53)—since the figure was “in the clouds where Don Berto’s soul waited, machete in hand” (52). We are also presented with the mythification of the jíbaro in the catalog of cultural

references the author is creating. In this cultural recollection, Don Berto's race is of extreme importance because it plays two roles. In the context of Puerto Rico, I argue, his race is a last gesture of re-assigning in the body of the jíbaro a heritage that has been denied by power. In the context of the diaspora, as we will see, the appropriation of blackness becomes a tool for adaptation processes, in which racial and ethnic identification ease social accommodation.

Santiago's role as a writer goes beyond the act of telling her life story because she is preoccupied with the uncanny feeling of having to recollect her national identity. The author's representation of a female and black jíbaro showcases generational differences and viewpoints towards national symbols. This jíbaro representation allows for a discovery of the broken hems of the Puerto Rican socio-historical fabric. Negi's inability to understand Juanita's pain displays a small shift in the perceptual structure of nationhood, and it moves her towards the inquiries of national symbols. Negi sees the jíbaro in the context of a larger cultural landscape because of her detachment, which helps her understand and claim his political construction as a historical destiny for herself. This is evident after Don Berto's death, when Negi states that he "had become a ghost, a creature that could haunt my nights and see my every move, like the phantasms he told us about when we sat at his feet, listening to his stories" (52). It is this "haunting of the jíbaro" that I see as becoming the mark of a generation in transition—the migrant jíbaro—that is revisiting the structure of its national symbols. In the context of Puerto Rico, this act is a depiction of cultural continuity—as Negi continues the jíbaro's oral traditions, reproducing the stories she learned from Don Berto and making up some stories of her own (58). In the context of the migration there is an evolution of the national symbolic structures that speaks of an examination of and about culture outside of the island.

The development I am suggesting is more evident if we track Santiago's depiction of the jíbaro. Negi's vision of the jíbaro when she was younger is rooted in the idealization of the jíbaro, presenting it as a god-like figure as she states she used to take the "jíbaro poetry" she heard on the radio, and repeat it "like a prayer" in times of stress (18). The act of beatifying the jíbaro—by presenting it in a faith-based context and as a guiding force of her national imaginary—is then transformed to a form she can mold and adapt to her national (and diasporic) identity needs. This transformation is possible because Santiago has already discussed the nuanced dichotomies embedded in the multiple interpretations of the jíbaro: as a word that denotes tradition and nationality, as well as backwardness for different social and class sites. It is at this point in Santiago's memoir when we can start to distinguish a thematic thread that delineates the author's story before her move to New York: The idea that identities, whether national or cultural, are a subjective enterprise that depends on the interpretation of the observer's location.

One particular episode stands out in the memoir that speaks of these multiple interpretations of identity and identification. This episode starts when Negi discovers that her name is Esmeralda, and her nickname comes from wordplay on the word *negrita* since she was considered black when she was born (13). As the first-born child of a white mother and a black father, Negi's skin color was described as black by her maternal grandmother until her sisters Delsa and Norma were born. At this moment, however, Negi ceased being the black daughter of the family and shifted to a "centered" racial position in the domestic structure because Norma was considered white and Delsa black (she was darker than Negi) (13). Similar to the representation of the female jíbara, this description of a racial scale in the domestic environment presents the breakage with essentialist and static notions of racial identity at *home*. Santiago

takes this notion even further in order to display the subjectivity embedded in identification processes when Negi discovers that her real name was Esmeralda, and that most people had names and nicknames. At this moment she states: “It seemed too complicated, as if each one of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not” (14). Her acknowledgement of identity interpretations includes an awareness of the complexities behind identification. In this sense, identity—whether racial, gender, sexual, or national—is malleable for both the subject and her/his observer.

In summation, Santiago uses the guava and the jíbaro as items that define the Puerto Rican nation. The items represent unquestionable certainties that are rooted, not only in discourse but also in intrinsic imagined bonds, which, in her view, link the national community together. For the author, these items of identity become ontological truths of *puertorriqueñidad* precisely *because* they are shared and evolve in the collective social psyche. Within the portrayals of these national items lays a pattern that belies the purposefulness and intentionality of talking, and creating, a migrant identity with an undeviating national background. Her system may seem arbitrary, but, instead, there exists an assembling process that comprises multiple social and political ideologies which has long been in conflict throughout the Puerto Rican history. By clarifying these scattered products of social conflict, Santiago pieces together the national and historical origins that lie outside of official discourse and make them readily available and (for her) settled. This clarification is done in order to prepare her for the new conflicts that will arise once migration is included—as it should be—in the catalogue that comprises a comprehensive Puerto Rican history.

Santiago’s account of her experiences immediately after arriving in New York begin with a description of her emotional perceptions of the new place, describing the feelings of

hopefulness, excitement and fear the family experience because of the “newness” of their life (220). At first, Negi’s knowledge of New York was filtered through her mother, who saw a world full of economic possibilities in Brooklyn (247), but also saw the disadvantages they were going to face because of their ethnic background. The mother advises that they have to prove themselves to the Americans, and as such they have to work hard to get ahead (246). The result of this advice will inform Negi’s decision to pursue an education at the end of the memoir and, as we will see, it plays an important part in the process of disidentification in comparison to the jíbaro philosophy she claimed for herself. First, I will discuss Negi’s encounter with the United States and its relation to the development of inquiries that lead to disidentification through the analysis of her acknowledgment of difference, different processes of acculturation, race, gender, and home.

Disidentification begins as a process the moment *difference* is recognized by the migrant subject, and ignites inquiries about her/his relationship with the homeland. In the memoir, Negi started to witness small signs of difference right at the airport when her mother and other people criticized other migrant Puerto Rican’s clothes, indicating that the clothes were not good enough for a new life in Brooklyn (216). Similar minor differences, this time about linguistic variations, were quickly acknowledged when she arrives at her grandmother’s apartment and learn the word *marketa* as a replacement for the Spanish word for supermarket (220). Negi also felt disappointment in the first few weeks in New York, which drove her to create comparisons between this city and Puerto Rico that do not relate to disidentification. The first connections she makes are related to the social state of New York in terms of strained economic conditions and crime. The economic conditions the author describes are similar to other narratives of migration, as she focuses on the preoccupations of the adults around her about not finding work or getting

laid off, and the lack of help from family members or neighbors (254). These concerns draw a line of difference between Puerto Rico and New York because, in Puerto Rico, as Negi states, even in the worst economic conditions people helped each other (254). Of crime, Brooklyn was a place in which “[e]very day there were murders, rapes, muggings, knifings, and shootings,” by contrast, “[i]n Puerto Rico the crimes had always happened somewhere else, in cities far from Macún” (252). Even when Negi does not offer an account of crime while she was in Puerto Rico, the reality of crime she describes in Macún may seem unrealistic. This is because Macún is not far from the metropolitan area of San Juan, which is where historically crime has concentrated in Puerto Rico due to the area’s population concentration. This unawareness may be explained by Negi’s age, because she was a child in Puerto Rico and may not have been aware of crime around her. Nonetheless, these notions about crime display the first steps in the development of the idealization of the homeland that takes place for many migrants in diasporic settings and in many narratives of migration. At this point in her encounter with New York, and contrary to her mother’s optimism, for Negi “being in Brooklyn was not a new life but the continuation of the old one” (247). What these first economic and class comparisons she makes upon her first weeks of arrival do is devise a parallel between Puerto Rico and New York, and speak more of class similarities rather than other “difference” conditions she will discover later.

As the months pass, Negi begins to notice the differences between her and her sibling’s processes of adaptation to the new environment. She states that she felt the opposite of her siblings Edna and Raymond, who loved everything on the second day of their arrival (224) and continued to do so. Here we see how adaptation develops at different rates for members of different generations and age groups, and most importantly, how it is a subjective matter. Negi and her sibling’s understanding of adaptation also contrasts with that of other members of the

migrant community already established in the United States, (represented by her grandmother Tata and Tata's friend Don Julio). For them, adaptation is more a process of biological adjustment because they consider one is fully adapted after the first winter, since blood is still thin from living in Puerto Rico (224). Acclimating to winter, as a symptomatic marker for adaptation, becomes a symbolic signifier in which "blood" (also in its connotation of origin) is put to the test and metaphorically altered, which suggests integration. Negi's acculturation process, however, goes in the direction many migrants of her age experience, by quickly developing proficiency in reading and writing English, even when she couldn't speak it very well. Similar processes of acculturation took place for her through the education she was receiving at school. When she states: "George Washington, I had just learned, was the Father of our country" (248), we encounter either a sarcastic and political comment about Puerto Rican history, or a representation of acculturation processes as it slowly replaces national understandings through institutionalized education.

After migrating to the United States, the subtle adaptation and assimilation processes become clearer as they are problematized when Negi learns of the different ethnic and cultural components of the city. She indicates:

In Puerto Rico the only foreigners I'd been aware of were *Americanos*. In two days in Brooklyn I had already encountered Jewish people, and now Italians. There was another group of people Mami pointed out to me. *Morenos*. But they weren't foreigners, because they were American. They were black, but they didn't look like Puerto Rican *negros*. (225)

This knowledge of diverse ethnic and race groups that Negi encounters comes from second-hand experience since it is transferred from her mother's perceptions. Santiago makes the point of highlighting that these are her mother's perspectives of society, and even though she does not question them, they inform the development of Negi's measurements of the new

society's ethnic and cultural structures. As seen, they show a clearly demarcated racial and ethnic map, and interestingly, at this point, Santiago does not mention any racial, ethnic, or social ties with these marginalized groups. Only the "*morenos*" stand out physically but they were not like black Puerto Ricans. This difference is revealing of how race and ethnicity are subjective if we consider that Negi and her sister were considered black in Puerto Rico, and that their whole family would be considered black based on American color lines. The distance Santiago creates between "blacks" and "Puerto Rican *negros*" speaks of the tensions within cultures and highlights the social and physical spaces each group has carved for themselves in the city's urban landscape.

It is in school, where Negi has a first hand experience with the structures that separate races and ethnicities outside of the mother's education. Here Negi observes how the social structure of the students mirrors that of the city, and how one's race and ethnic background determines their place in the city and in society. Furthermore, Negi learns that the classification under the Hispanic category creates differences within the Hispanic group but, more interestingly, also the nationality label for Puerto Ricans. Understanding and navigating the social order of her school, Negi discovers that there are two kinds of Puerto Ricans: the newly arrived, and the "Brooklyn Puerto Ricans." Of these groups Negi observes

The two types didn't mix. The Brooklyn Puerto Ricans spoke English, and often no Spanish at all. To them, Puerto Rico was the place where their grandparents lived, a place they visited on school and summer vacations, a place [in] which they complained was backward and mosquito-ridden. Those of us for whom Puerto Rico was still a recent memory were also split in two groups: the ones who longed for the island and the ones who wanted to forget it as soon as possible. (230)

Negi's distinction between these two groups shows that there also are national anxieties within the same national group, regardless of ethnic or racial tensions between them. These

anxieties, upon closer inspection, showcase characteristics that speak of disidentification in the group who want to forget the island, as well as diverse processes of acculturation and hybridization. For example, Negi states that the Italians and Blacks sat in opposing places in the cafeteria because “[t]he two groups hated each other more than they hated Puerto Ricans” (229). These two groups had their particular style: the way they walked, dressed, and wore their hair. However, Puerto Ricans walked the school hallways “between the Italians and the *morenos*, neither one nor the other, but looking and acting like a combination of both” (230). Puerto Ricans were an in-between cluster that had adopted customs from different ethnic and racial groups. From Negi’s perspective, Puerto Ricans could be seen as belonging to one or the other group “depending on the texture of their hair, the shade of their skin, their makeup, and the way they walked down the hall” (230). This chameleonic ability speaks of segmented levels of assimilation as well as of different levels of disidentification. Santiago is vague about which kind of Puerto Rican group she belongs to in this larger Puerto Rican social order. She belonged to the newly arrived group and not the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans because she had arrived from Puerto Rico two months before. However, she does not specify if she belongs to the ones longing for the island or the ones who want to forget it. It is captivating that she does not feel comfortable with the newly arrived Puerto Ricans—which would be the group she should identify with the most because she is recently arrived. On the other hand, she would also like to be accepted by the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans. This need for group membership is interesting because—while being in either group would establish her in a community that was nonetheless marginalized—she saw in the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans an intergroup relationship that was closer to where she needed to be in order to feel comfortable because this group spoke English. As such, Negi sees it as a

necessity to slowly, and selectively, discard language and cultural traits (disidentify with them) in order to ease her adaptability.

Santiago's descriptions of Negi's life beyond her domestic environment are limited to these instances in which Negi is at school. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I see the representation of *home* in Puerto Rican and Dominican literatures of migration as an aesthetic and critical continuation of the discourses of what I called the *discourses of the nuclear nation*. I argued that these narrative representations of home, serve as a strategy of adaptation for writers in the diasporic context rather than criticizing the homeland's normativity. In my discussion about Negi's home in Puerto Rico above, I mentioned how Khader saw as a topos in Puerto Rican women writers the rewriting of the home narrative. Of Santiago in particular, Khader states that the author "decenters home at the intersection of gender, class, xenophobia, and race" because home cannot be a site of comfort and safety (65). However, in Santiago there are two representations of home—a home in Puerto Rico and a home in New York. In both places, home becomes an unstable entity because the family is always moving from apartment to apartment; rather than narrating home as a place of stability, of psychological and physical safety. However, during her first months in New York, Negi expresses a longing for Puerto Rico, even when both home sites share similar characteristics (dilapidation, poverty, etc.). This is because, for Negi, life in Puerto Rico was mostly outdoors as Negi was always trying to be out of the many houses they inhabited (252). This is contrasted with the suffocating, constrained, and oppressed feeling Negi found in the apartments in New York (221). Puerto Rico as a home site of safety comes from the fraternity of her neighbors and the sense of community they all shared; this creates the sense of home she missed in New York. What is revealing is that, even in the strained social and economic conditions they live in New York, a desire to return to the island is not verbalized by

either Negi or her mother throughout the story. This lack of interest in returning to Puerto Rico places these two home sites in a confrontational position: how is it that New York—with its social, economic, and political conflicts for the migrant—becomes a better place to live than the island? How does New York turn into a better home? In answer, I argue that this is because of the gender codes that were implemented in the household in Puerto Rico and their erasures in New York, which make the migrant experience in New York preferable to a return to the island. Through the narration of this new sense of home found in New York, I propose, Santiago is remapping the female bodies' movements within the insular and diasporic spaces, redefining traditional referents of insular-gender identities, and disavowing the preconceived concepts of the mythic home that is built on patriarchal structures.

This redefinition is presented through the portrait and portrayal of the male characters in Negi's life and their place in the structure of the domestic space. In Puerto Rico Negi has a natural inclination to her father and their relationship is based on respect and admiration. Likewise, other male figures like her grandfather and the jíbaro Don Berto were respected and even exalted. On the other hand, Negi's mother is bound to the patriarchal codes of society and is portrayed as a supportive wife. Later in their marriage, the mother realizes that her husband is not able to financially provide for all their children, which leads her to get a job of her own—an act that is discouraged by her husband and the wider community. While Negi's father opposes the emasculating gesture that his wife's employment bestows upon him; he does not force her to quit. Negi's mother transgression continues in other forms of resistance of patriarchal mores culminating in her decision to leave for New York and leave her husband behind. As seen, the mother's breakage with patriarchal orders started in Puerto Rico and it is not a disidentifying act that was produced in the United States. Nonetheless, this presents the United States as a site that

the mother perceives as liberating of the masculinist structures of the nation, and, as such, it devises New York as a homely construction. Negi's gender, however, confined her to the same structures her mother began to slowly break away from in Puerto Rico, but she was not aware of these social constraints because of her young age. For example, when her mother got the job and she witnessed community's response to her decision—"angry resentment that became gossip, and taunts and name-calling" (122)—she understood that her "mother was breaking a taboo I'd never heard about" (122). This lack of gender codes knowledge aids Negi in maintaining her relationship and closeness with her father, even after she migrated while he stayed in Puerto Rico.

In contrast to this "positive" representation of the Puerto Rican male, in New York we are presented with a roster of male figures that represent the opposite: Don Julio (her grandmother's friend), her uncle Chico, and her mother's boyfriend, Francisco. Of the three, Don Julio is an alcoholic and her uncle Chico sexually harasses her. At the same time, Francisco becomes a sort of father figure for her—who also, interestingly, like Negi's father, used to sing jíbaro songs to his son—but Francisco vanishes from her life after dying of cancer. Likewise, Negi's father—who stayed in the narration like a phantasm through the letters Negi shared with him—slowly fades away in the narration, after her decision to cut ties with him when she discovers that he remarried back in Puerto Rico. These male subject portrayals and the roles they represent in the diaspora run counter to the idea of the patriarch, head of the household, ruler of the domestic environment in the homeland. The erasure of this form of patriarchy comes with the rising prominence of female figures taking central stage in New York. The mother becomes the head of the household and Negi, as we will see, sheds her submissive role by gaining a voice that she did

not have prior to migration. This voice acquisition runs parallel to her decision to not talk to her father again, and this decision becomes the complete erasure of the patriarch in the family's life.

Marshall has noted that while Negi's concerns on the island were related to cultural and colonial politics, there is a shift to concerns of gender as she moves and matures in New York (48-49). Similar to Marshall's argument, my initial analysis of Santiago's construction of a national identity in Puerto Rico through writing refers, tangentially, to Marshall's reference about cultural and colonial politics. Also, coinciding with Marshall, I see this shift of gender concerns in New York, but I see them as a direct result to dislocation. For example, Negi's refusal to conform to traditional female behavior and her rejection of traditional gender codes takes place in New York, after migrating from the island. This is narrated in conjunction with her development of an independent identity. An example that stands out is when Negi's mother went to enroll her in school and the school's principal says he is going to put her in the 7th grade (instead of the 8th grade, where she belonged) because she did not speak English (225-26). What follows is a negotiation process in which Negi takes a stand and confronts the principal directly. The exchange concludes with the principal allowing Negi to stay in the 8th grade temporarily, until she proves her intellect. This rebellious confrontation with an adult male runs counter to the domestically feminine education that she received in Puerto Rico. The education stressed the values of respect for adults in general and men—most importantly—in particular. However, in New York her mother celebrated the fact that Negi could speak English (even if broken) and Negi—even when she was afraid to be considered a “*mal educada*” (227)—showed for the first time the female independence she could not show in Puerto Rico. This female independence will characterize her life in the diaspora from then on, distancing once again from homeland gender discourses.

Negi's new sense of empowerment after this event is physically manifested four months later, after her successful stay in the 8th grade, where she learned to read and write in English. This individuality, she states, made her a "different person" in the eyes of other 8th graders and her own (237). Becoming a "different person" is closely linked to the change in gender roles self-perception and is also an aspect that Santiago portrays analogous to Negi's development as an adolescent; as a girl who is turning into a woman. For example, in a secondary story line in Negi's life pre-migration, Santiago discusses the importance placed in her development as a *señorita*—that is, her transition from child to woman through the first menstrual period.¹¹ In the memoir, we can see how Santiago introduces the development of this topic and its importance in diasporic identity development because she interrupts the narrative about Negi's life in New York—with all the racial, ethnic, economic and social problems she was tackling—in order to insert a small vignette discussing Negi's first period. This interruption is relevant because Santiago started hinting about it while Negi was in Puerto Rico, and follows it to its full accomplishment in New York. In Puerto Rico Negi did not know about the physiology of the female body, or what menstruation was—which she had to learn through a neighbor (121). However, her first menstruation did not happen until she moved to New York and her mother celebrated with excitement this developmental milestone into adulthood (233). What is of note in this secondary story line is how Santiago links the first menstruation with breakage of gender roles along with the gain of an independent female subjectivity not questioned in the diaspora. Barbara B Harrell's study of cultural perspectives of women's menstrual cycles states that in women who are between the cycles of reproduction and child rearing, menstruation becomes "the female's liminal freedom" (817). This theorization of the liminal characteristic of the menstrual cycle is symbolically relevant because Negi's first menstruation occurred after she

migrates away from Puerto Rico. This establishes the trope of "becoming a woman" as analogous to the in-between state characteristic of identities in diasporic settings. In other words, Negi's coming into being is in direct correspondence with her development as a woman and her development of a diasporic sensibility.

The development of this diasporic sensibility is also felt in the very fabric of the narrative Santiago creates for Negi in New York. It is in this part that the articulation of a Puerto Rican identity Negi crafted while in Puerto Rico fades as she concludes her comparison between the two places and focuses on her life in New York. This is particularly true for the reduction of occurrences in which food is mentioned in the narrative while in New York. This absence can be justified by arguing that because they were no longer in Puerto Rico the accessibility to Puerto Rican food items was limited. However, in the 1960s the Puerto Rican diaspora was already well established in New York with a population of almost 900,000 (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 83). The city was the site of a growing community that had developed a market in response to the Puerto Rican community's cultural and gastronomic needs. This access to food goods from Puerto Rico is exposed by Santiago upon her arrival to New York where her grandmother received them with an *asopao* that her uncle had made (219). If Puerto Rican food items were accessible in Brooklyn, one would have to wonder why is it that Santiago ended her gastronomic references immediately after migration?

Examining the gastro dynamics of displacement, Knut Oyangen analyses the food habits in migrant contexts as they relate to its socio-cultural totality. The author argues that the presence of food in the migrant context is "as much an act of innovation, assertion, and transformation as it is an act of reproducing tradition." Furthermore, he states that this reproduction of tradition is, in itself, a conscious performance of identity (324). In the memoir, Santiago continues the

thematic thread she had built around food describing how Negi learns of different ethnic groups because of her contact with their cuisine (Jews had kosher and Italians had pizza, 224). The silence regarding Puerto Rican gastronomic items discloses a lack of the “tradition reproduction” Oyangen speaks about and, as such, we see Negi and her mother eating pizza because they should not eat kosher (224). Considering that food habits become a marker for cultural continuity, difference and/or assimilation with the ability to express both “oneness” and “otherness;” (Oyangen 329); Santiago’s silence about the food items she so persistently highlighted pre-migration is intriguing, annulling an identification with the “oneness” that the Puerto Rican food items would have in view of food as a medium of identity. However, the author provides a conclusion to this thematic thread of Puerto Rican gastronomy in an episode after the first snow in which the family prepares *piraguas* (236).¹² The Puerto Rican desert is here reinterpreted as the family makes it with snow rather than with crushed ice, as it is made in Puerto Rico. By presenting a new version of this dessert, Santiago ends the thematic thread of gastronomy as a symbolic representation of national identity by reinterpreting it and redefining it to speak of cultural syncretism.

Correspondingly to Puerto Rican cuisine, the representation of the jíbaro—strongly highlighted pre-migration—takes on another meaning once Negi arrives in New York. In this case, the idea of the jíbaro is made more complex than that of the gastronomic items because the jíbaro in New York is tightly associated with the nuances of it as a national symbol and underdevelopment the figure has in Puerto Rican culture. As we saw in the discussion of the jíbaro representation while Negi was in Puerto Rico, Negi wanted to be, and identified later, as a jíbara. In the compilation of items Santiago crafted in the creation of a jíbara identity, how is this

jíbaro representation transplanted in New York City? How does the jíbaro, as a national symbol, survive in the United States?

The answers to these questions are located in a reflection Negi has after Mr. Barone, the school's guidance counselor, asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. To this question Negi replies: "When I was very young, I wanted to be a *jíbara*. When I was older, I wanted to be a cartographer, then a topographer. But since we'd come to Brooklyn, I'd not thought about the future much" (257). This answer is revealing in regards to Negi's migrant identity formation in the United States. First, we see how she naturally structures her life in a *before/after* migration construction. In the pre-migration part, the jíbaro is a symbol of national pride and identity sustained in the idealized image of the nation she developed as a child. The jíbaro is also the national identity Santiago self-endowed, as developed in the narrative through the cultural items displayed. In her response to the school counselor we see then how the jíbaro image is equated to occupations related to *space* (cartographer, topographer), which suggests it is a "profession", far removed from its representation as a cultural symbol. The nature of these associations reveals the root of identity formation conflicts; particularly its relation to geography, to *space*. In stating that she has not thought about what "to be" now, she acknowledges this dislocation of being in a place in which being a jíbara is not conducive to the new *space* she now inhabits as a migrant subject in the New York social and cultural landscapes. In other words, her life post-migration in Brooklyn presents signs of uncertainty mainly because she is still figuring out how to fit in these new social and cultural structures as a migrant jíbara.

In his analysis of the memoir, Gregory Stephens calls Negi a "North American Jíbara" indicating that the dislocation of this jíbara represents a variant of the American dream. Stephens states that *jibarism* "affirms 'official' multiculturalism, which proclaims that it *pays* to be

different: i.e., you can be ‘other’ and yet succeed if you market your difference in a way that affirms the acculturating (post-assimilationist) capacities of the United States” (32). This author relates this affirmation of the acculturating capacities of the United States to upward social mobility represented at the end of the memoir—with Negi’s entrance to the Performing Arts High School and, eventually, Harvard. However, I disagree with Stephens in his assertion that “difference” equals success if we consider the circumstances surrounding Negi’s *jíbarism* in New York and its relation to the drive for upward mobility. For example, Negi’s experiences as a jíbara in Puerto Rico, when her family moved and she attended school in the city of San Juan, were marked by rejection because of her jíbaro accent, the way she behaved, and her (supposed) incapacity for learning (137-40). Upon these experiences with her classmates and teachers, Negi adhered to her jíbaro roots, clinging to the identity she claimed for herself and went home to draw “butterflies and flowers, trees on grassy hills, hummingbirds kissing hibiscus blossoms, all the things that didn’t exist in El Mangle” in San Juan and reminded her of her life in the countryside (140). The attachment she had for the countryside and the jíbaro philosophy permeated her childhood and continued, for a while, in the United States. In New York, the “Brooklyn Puerto Ricans” and other ethnic groups similarly rejected her because they viewed her the same way she was seen in school in Puerto Rico (a backward subject with no education or intellect). This is evident by her position as a newly arrived Puerto Rican, the hierarchical distinctions the students created for the Puerto Rican nationality, and the school’s principal decision to put her in a lower grade. However, contrary to the adherence-to-jíbarism attitude she had in Puerto Rico when she was rejected for being jíbara, in New York she does not respond the same way. In opposition we see a Negi who begins working her way through social upward mobility by learning English, improving in school and, ultimately at the end of the memoir,

entering college rather than confronting or verbalizing a position against the social structures that placed her at the bottom. In other words, Negi's response to this classism relied on shedding her *jíbarism*, the very fabric that formed her personal philosophy and her national identity. This decision does not represent, in my view, an affirmation of multiculturalism, as Stephens indicates, by "playing" to be different in an attempt to affirm an acculturating capacity. Instead, I argue, shedding the jíbaro represents a process of disidentification with what *jíbarism* means socially as a concept (even if not necessarily culturally in its role of national identity).

What we see in Santiago, through Negi's experiences in both Puerto Rico and New York, are trajectories of class difference that are produced in the contexts of countryside-urban migrations. That is, I see her movements from the countryside in Puerto Rico to San Juan, and then from San Juan to New York, as migrant trajectories that are analogous and share similar effects in identity formation due to class differences. If Negi did not acknowledge these power structures while in Puerto Rico—because of her young age—in Brooklyn she becomes aware of them as part of her process of coming of age and realizes the importance of acculturation. What stands out of this new knowledge, however, is the relationship both experiences have in her understanding of identity as a Puerto Rican subject in New York. In this parallelism, Negi's jíbara identity is transplanted to the context of a different (and bigger) urban setting, where the social biases of this new jíbaro/Puerto Rican culture as underdeveloped and uncivilized are also placed. The move away from the jíbaro—represented in the shift from wanting to be a jíbara to wanting to be a cartographer/topographer while in Puerto Rico—becomes a detachment when she arrives in New York. Even when there are only a limited number of occasions when the jíbaro is mentioned while in New York, this distance is not necessarily a rejection of the jíbaro as cultural reference, but a step outside of it in its class form.

The perception of the jíbaro as a class category in New York originates through the fear the family experienced after migration. The neighborhoods where the family lived (plagued with crime) along with economic hardships created a culture of fear in the domestic environment whose only way out was through hard work in order to get ahead (246). When the school counselor asks Negi what she wants to be, she is prompted to evaluate her current place in the city and her status as a jíbara. In this discussion, Mr. Barone tells Negi that she is a “smart girl” and that he’s going to work to get her into an academic school so she can have a better opportunity at college (258). The following exchange with her mother exemplifies Negi’s fear and thus, the possibility of progress she is envisioning as representative of moving away from her past:

“‘How can people live like this?’ I shrieked once, desperate to run across a field, to feel grass under my feet instead of pavement.
‘Like what?’ Mami asked, looking around our apartment, the kitchen and living room crisscrossed with sagging lines of drying diapers and bedclothes.
‘Everyone on top of each other. No room to do anything. No air.’
‘Do you want to go back to Macún, to live like savages, with no electricity, no toilets ...’
‘At least you could step outside everyday without somebody trying to kill you.’
‘Ay, Negi, stop exaggerating!’
‘I hate my life!’ I yelled.
‘Then do something about it,’ she yelled back.
Until Mr. Barone showed me the listing for Performing Arts High School, I hadn’t known what to do” (260-61).

In this passage we witness first the discrepancies between the meanings of homeland and hostland for migrants of different generations. For the mother, New York means progress and the liberty she did not have in Puerto Rico, despite the crime and the fear. For Negi, the environment does not represent good living when she compares it to Puerto Rico. At this moment we can only assume that she wishes to go back to the open fields of Macún, but instead of opting for that

alternative she sees the possibility of getting an education in the Performing Arts High School in Manhattan as the only chance to get out of that environment. Thus, Negi is aware that a return to Puerto Rico in her current economic and educational condition will not result in an upward social trajectory and that she would have to take advantage of the opportunity of getting an education if she wishes to progress. The possibility of going to college is what changes Negi's perception of her future, and by extension her role as a jibara in New York. This is evidenced by her loss of fear: "'I'm not afraid ... I'm not afraid ... I'm not afraid.' Every day I walked home from school repeating those words. The broad streets and sidewalks that impressed me so on the first day we had arrived had become as familiar as the dirt road from Macún to the highway" (260). As of that moment, Negi can already see the Brooklyn environment as an extension of herself because she has become accustomed to the city. Puerto Rico—mentioned through the Macún reference—is suggested as a similar indicator between the places but it is, in reality, a sign of difference because Negi sees herself as moving away from that fear of poverty—the same poverty she lived in Puerto Rico—by going to a school in Manhattan. By leaving Brooklyn—where the Puerto Rican community she knows is based—she is moving further away from the culture of her native land.

When Negi decides to go to the Performing Arts High School, Santiago describes how a team of the schoolteachers had prepared Negi's for the new school's interview. The preparation ranged from how to control her body behavior along with how to hide her Puerto Rican accent. The clear staging tone of this preparation involves, at its center, a performance of socio-economic class because Negi needs to disguise her "low class"/migrant behavior and, by extension, her background through accent and behavioral shading. This preparation initiated a process of performance that, ostensibly, continues to this day for Santiago. In her interview with

the author, Carmen Dolores Hernández draws attention to Santiago's perfectly modulated English tone, which, as Hernández states, reveals her training in the Performing Arts High School (157). Similarly, this aspect of upward mobility and performance that begins in this memoir is more developed in its sequel, *Almost a Woman* (1999). As Baron-Frits states, in this second memoir, Negi "tries to shed her 'puertoricannes' as she struggles to gain independence first by finding a job" (37). Baron-Frits adds that the lack of upward mobility creates in Negi a void "filled with notions of 'the other,'—an other who is always successful" (37). The importance of this conception of class mobility is more evident in the way Santiago decides to end her memoir. At the end, Negi decides to go the Performing Arts High School and the author skips in the narrative her life in Manhattan, in school, and in college. Unknown are Negi's struggles as a migrant in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment and their accompanying racial, ethnic, and gender struggles. Instead, Santiago leaps forward to Negi returning to the Performing Arts High School after graduating from Harvard, ending her memoir with the message that she fulfilled her desire to leave Brooklyn and successfully progress.

In her memoir, Santiago reproduces the same tropes characteristic of other migrant literatures: the economic hardships that ignites migration, the problems of adaptation, assimilation and acculturation, as well as the different identity conflicts that relate to finding one's niche in a multi-ethnic and multi-racial environment. However, once her memoir's narration turns towards her life post-migration, Santiago skims through these topics, rushing through Negi's life in Brooklyn, and focuses on how she gained an education. Brief, silenced or inexistent are the references that deal with her role as a black Puerto Rican woman who recently migrated to New York. The experiences of a booming Puerto Rican diasporic community finding its niche within the complex network of multiple diasporas' contact zones are only briefly hinted

at in Santiago's story. As a result, leaving the migrant jíbaro behind, Santiago focuses on the idea of progress and the possibility of moving upward in the class hierarchy. The road leading to a quality education is not characterized as a strenuous, uphill battle because of the bureaucratic and social problems a migrant individual goes through are not described. In turn, we witness an easy and comfortable passing from growing up in the ghetto to attending Harvard. Santiago delves into the aspects of these conflicts in her other memoirs, but I find interesting the fact that she did not envision her first memoir as one that would tackle these issues. Especially when there was no assurance that the author would write two more memoirs in which she would have the opportunity to do so. This leaves the reader with the question of why the author would decide to focus her life story after migrating to the United States in the contexts of education and progress. These contexts reveal the meaning in how the realization of the ethos of the American Dream is internalized.

I read Santiago's fast-forwarding of her life to talk about what lead her to college as part of a fear of migration. In this case, the fear is about being unable to adapt by not moving upward economically through education. This migrant-jíbaro complex—in which a Puerto Rican migrant is aware of her/his place in the new society's class scale and fears rejection due to their economic status—becomes, in my view, an overall theme in the memoir based on the progression the author presents in her migration from Puerto Rico. The possibility of going to a new school in Manhattan, as Negi mother's stated, would expose her to "a different class of people (263), establishing that education, along with social progress, is what would complete their acceptance in the U.S. society. This class progress goes against the previous exposition of the jíbaro life as one that is founded on closeness to nature, a life of independence, contemplation, and intractability (12), presenting two life philosophies that oppose each other. Reading the memoir

as the search of progress, problematizes the author's representation of nationness both in the diaspora as well as in Puerto Rico. This reading is also tightly linked to Santiago's experience upon her return to the island after she graduated college which was "devastating" for the author (C. Hernández 162). This experience marks a third rejection in Negi's life; the first as a jíbara in the city in Puerto Rico, the second as a Puerto Rican jíbara in New York, and then the third—as outlined in "A Note to the Reader" of the 2006 edition (278)—as an "Americanized" Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico. As such, Santiago's memoir becomes a search not only of identity, but also of a site in which she could harmonize the multiple rejections she was subjected to for being an "other" in places where she thought she belonged.

Furthermore, Santiago distances herself from these migrant Puerto Rican's conflicts in the diaspora when she discusses her place as a migrant writer in the larger, all-encompassing arena of Puerto Rican literature. One could assume that, as a Puerto Rican writer who writes about her experiences growing up in New York, the author would find her niche in the group that forms the social/literary trend that developed the Nuyorican movement. However, Santiago distances herself from this group by indicating that she does not live in New York anymore, and she is not connected to a community of writers there (C. Hernández 161). Moving away from New York City, the author further distances herself away from other Puerto Rican communities by living first in Texas and then in Syracuse, NY, and recognizes that this places her "outside of that experience" of the New York Puerto Ricans (C. Hernández 161). As such, she states, "the Puerto Rican community was whatever I brought with me," adding that this community "is my family: my mother and sisters and brothers" (161-62). Since family is the network that compounds her access to Puerto Rican culture, it is not difficult to understand why it is that her story in this memoir depicts a different "type" of migration, one that is characterized by a feeling

of enclosure and isolation, and does not address the communal problems that is the usual focus of other Puerto Rican writers in New York. As a result, she portrays a migrant experience that centers heavily on her personal journey towards a life outside of poverty, a life that does not have an in-depth racial and ethnic discussion of these problems in the diaspora.

In his analysis about New York Puerto Ricans, Miguel Algarín indicates that the roots of this community are the “debris of the ghettos,” the dependence on manual labor (which he describes as brute force), and the loss of trust (90) rather than grounded by ethno-racial problems. Through this lens, Santiago can be read as an author who fights against the ghettoization of the Puerto Rican culture in New York City. This explains why her narrative shifts to focus on her entrance in the Performing Arts High School. This “passage” in to the school is, in itself, a symbolic dramatization of the obstacles faced to move between classes. Based on Santiago’s experience—as a child in Puerto Rico, as an adolescent in New York, and then as an adult back in Puerto Rico—we would have to ask then how is this relationship with the jíbaro with whom she identified after writing her memoir. How is this jíbaro compartmentalized in her self-perception as a Puerto Rican?

In the introduction to the Spanish version of her memoir, Santiago makes the following statement regarding her cultural experience in both Puerto Rico and the United States: “One culture has enriched the other, and both have enriched me.... When I was a girl I wanted to be *una jíbara*. When I was an adolescent I wanted to be a North American. As a woman now, I am both things, a North American *jíbara*. I carry my banana mark with pride and dignity” (*Cuando era puertorriqueña* xviii). The syncretism observed in this statement marks the stability of her national and cultural identity along with the assimilation and acculturation processes developed in the United States. This statement is interesting because of its similarity to her answer to the

school counselor as she was interviewed about her future. In this case, however, we get an answer as to how her future turned out to be regarding her migrant identity. Santiago offers the “North American jíbara” as a response to her identity struggles and rejects hyphenated variations such as Puerto Rican-American or Nuyorican (xviii). In my view, this auto-denomination is reactionary because it opposes the tendency of Puerto Ricans in the United States to maintain their national identity intact under the gentile of *puertorriqueño*, as Jorge Duany indicates. As Duany posits, this is because Puerto Ricans are the most adamant at changing to another national terminology to identify themselves (76). As such, her jibarism needs to be put into a different category as an identity marker if we contemplate her particular journey as a migrant in the United States. If we consider the jíbaro philosophic stances Santiago applies to Negi’s upbringing in Puerto Rico, evidenced through her desire to become a jíbara, the subsequent act of neglecting this side and appropriating the jíbaro solely as a cultural element speak of this “different category” which I discuss. I consider that by rejecting the jíbaro’s life philosophy and at the same time claiming *jibariness*, Santiago presents the jíbaro simply, as she indicates, as a “banana mark” that highlights her Puerto Rican heritage, leaving the jíbaro simply as a national sign. As such, in her national identity structure, the jíbaro continues to have that preferential place as a symbol of the nation even when she has changed as a jíbara. This would explain why when Negi met a real jíbara who kissed her hands in New York after she helped her, she felt like the most important person in the world (251), as if in that contact the jíbara validated her own jibariness.

The memoir’s prologue in which Negi reflects on eating the guava becomes the real ending of Santiago’s story because it summarizes the overall identity conflicts common in Puerto Rican migrant experiences. Leaving the guava behind and moving to the pears and apples of her

adulthood is not a form of leaving the past behind. Instead, it is, as Stephens indicates, an act of not settling for a poor “translation” of the fruit (35), which is in itself marked by distance and interpretations that turned it into something distinctive. Through the cataloguing of national symbols Santiago displays alternative cultural forms of the migrant experience that speak of the spectrum of options, shades, and possibilities that constitute *puertorriqueñidad* as an identity in the context of the United States. Appropriating cultural elements, using food and the jíbaro as cultural props, gives her the power to reinterpret these symbols by showing their mutating character. Her twist on gender and race identities of the jíbaro proves that she not only knows and plays the social/cultural rules, but that she can also bend them even when she follows them. This shows that it is a culture in which Santiago identifies, but that at the same time is removed from it. The closeness and simultaneous distance shows that, based on her experience, Puerto Ricans abroad are indistinctly bound by ancestry and heritage and they need these cultural references in order to achieve in-group membership that validates their identity. Discarded are the geographical distances in which Puerto Ricans abroad are located, the loss of Spanish, the Americanization processes, the lack of cultural continuity, or the ethnic, racial, economic or political items that speak of a supposed homogeneity. Santiago’s understanding of herself as a Puerto Rican in the past—as the memoir’s title suggest—is a form of acknowledgement of being uprooted like a fruit, but the resulting product, no matter how dislocated and displaced, is a valid version of *puertorriqueñidad* created in a different context.

NOTES

NOTES

¹ She followed the publication with two more memoirs: *Almost a Woman* (1999), and *The Turkish Lover* (2005), which continue the story of her life post-migration. In this chapter I have decided to focus on the first installment of Santiago's memoir trilogy because Santiago's gives a considerable amount of attention to her upbringing in Puerto Rico, which allows us to see more clearly the processes of assimilation to the United States. Another reason I chose this memoir for my analysis is that, as the author stated in the 2006 edition of the memoir, she did not expect her memoir to become a dialogue about cultural identity (277). In my view, this memoir is detached from the reactions of readers and critics—who typically expect in narratives of migration the representation of certain migrant's experiences—which allowed Santiago to focus on writing her particular experiences without feeling the pressure to write a "memoir of migration" as evidenced in her other two books.

² Even though Baron-Frits article is mainly centered in Esmeralda Santiago's second memoir, *Almost a Woman* (1999), I deem the concept of "altering identities" relevant in her first memoir as well due to the interplay between the identities crafted in both Puerto Rico and New York.

³ As Marshall notes, *Boricua* is the indigenous name Puerto Ricans use to call themselves. Negrón-Muntaner uses *Boricua* along with *shame* to refer to the Puerto Rican identity that emerged through anti-colonial struggle (65).

⁴ Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*. New York: New York UP, 2004.

⁵ An interesting linguistic analysis of Santiago's code switching in her narrative would inquire the fact that she does not always—as she often does within the text—translate, put in italics, or explains the Spanish words to her English-speaking audience. It would be interesting to know if the lack of translation or explanation for words like *piragua* (45), *velorio* (50), and *arroz con dulce* (141), among others, were inadvertently left without translation or if these "mishaps" carry a deeper emotional (national) connotation. The author did indicate however, that in the process of writing her story she realized how much of her past was untranslatable (Stephens 33).

⁶ The following are some examples of these categories. Food: *ron cañita* (40), *pasteles* (40), *morcilla* (43), *piragua* (45), *arroz con dulce* (141). Traditions: *parrandas* and *aguinaldos* (40), the Three Magi (43), *velorio* (50), *novenas* (53) Nature: *morivivi* (8), *ceiba* and *flamboyán* (46), *pomarrosa* (46). Sayings. *pocavergüenza* (49), *machetazo* (50), *vaguada* (60), and all the Puerto Rican sayings that work as epigraphs in each chapter. As institutional symbol will be the figure of the jíbaro, which will be discussed further in my analysis.

⁷ These would be *Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño* (1843), *Album Puertorriqueño* (1844), a second *Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño* (1846), and *Cancionero de Borinquen* (1846).

⁸ For a comprehensive history of the Puerto Rican jíbaro in literature and cultural criticism see Carmen L. Torres-Robles' "La mitificación y desmitificación del jíbaro como

símbolo de la identidad nacional puertorriqueña." *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe* (1999): 241-253; and Ramón Soto-Crespo's "An Intractable Foundation: Luis Muñoz Marín and the Borderland State in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature." *American Literary History* 18.4 (2006): 712-738.

⁹ Female characters representing jíbaras have been present in literature since the 19th century. For example, Manuel Zeno Gandía's novel, *La Charca* (1894), presents a female jíbara—even when the author does not make a direct reference to the jíbaros. However, Zeno Gandía's female jíbaro representation lacks a clear voice, as opposed to Santiago's representation.

¹⁰ Luis Páles Matos and José Luis González most prominent works are *Tuntun de pasa y grifería* (1937), and *El país de cuatro pisos* (1980), respectively. Gregory Stephens and Carmen L. Torres-Robles have also observed how Santiago follows the literary lead of Luis Pales Matos and José Luis González by trying to recapture an African heritage in the Puerto Rican genealogical-racial map.

¹¹ This transition is of such importance for the author that she will pick it up again in her follow up memoir, *Almost a Woman* (1999), in which she will trace Negi's early dating experiences and her first sexual encounter, ending with her romantic involvement with a Turkish filmmaker (which is the subject of her third memoir).

¹² A piragua is Puerto Rican desert consisting of shaved ice. Typically is served in a plastic cone in a shaped-like a pyramid and is covered with fruit flavored syrup.

CHAPTER TWO

Etching Identities in Alien Turfs: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in Piri Thomas'

Down These Mean Streets (1967)

"I'm a Puerto Rican from Harlem" (83)
-Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967)

Among the authors and narratives considered to be initiators of the Nuyorican movement of Puerto Rican writers in the United States, Piri Thomas' memoir, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), occupies a central place. It remains a seminal text for various reasons. First the memoir was one of the first books written by a Puerto Rican in the United States to be published by a major press. Secondly, upon publication, it received acclaim by the American mainstream (McGill 179). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it was one of the first narratives that explored the upbringing of a Hispanic migrant in the context of poverty, class difference, and violence. What set this memoir apart from other Puerto Rican texts of the same era was the graphic and bilingual language, raw aggression, and crudely intimate depictions of the author's experience as a black Hispanic in the post-Depression era New York.¹ Thomas recognizes these differences himself indicating that other writers "wrote, but they wrote about Puerto Rico and their home" (McGill 181). Contrastingly, he "wrote about what was happening to us—or at least me—and the surroundings in those years" (McGill 181). I want to drive our attention to this "*us*" that Thomas describes because the pronoun creates a distance that disassociates from the pronoun "*they*"—those subjects who wrote about "their home." Who are these people he encompasses in these pronouns? Is he referring only to the Puerto Ricans who identify with Harlem—as mentioned in the epigraph above—or is he also enclosing the experience of other Puerto Ricans in other parts of the city? Is he referring to racial minorities within the context of

Puerto Rican migration, or is he alluding to migrant generations and their different perspectives about the homeland?

As a Puerto Rican born in New York, it is intriguing to think about this distinction between “us” and “them” because when we think of national communities in the context of migration, we tend to think of them as cohesive units that share similar experiences and preoccupations. The utterance of the pronoun “us,” in itself, refers to a sense of collective unity and a degree of social consistency that bonds group members physically, spiritually, and/or emotionally. I argue that this distance created in the us/them binary exists because Thomas is a second-generation migrant who sees a difference between him and those who migrated directly from Puerto Rico. What is alluring here is the fact that Thomas alludes to *their home* as if there is not only a distance between them, but also between his generation and the ancestral land. If these authors were writing about “Puerto Rico and their home”: the question of *where is home* located for Thomas is of central importance.

Considering that Piri grew up in the New York of the 1930s, his upbringing was complicated by the many different multi-cultural and multi-ethnic groups that collided in this space, which results in him questioning many layers of his identity. In the following analysis, I regard Piri’s search for approval and membership to this collective sense of “us” as the element that initiates his identity conflicts throughout the memoir. In other words, I see Piri’s search for belonging and acceptance in different social circles (from his father at home and his peers on the streets) as what develops different levels of identification that inform the identity of the character/author.² The critical consensus about Thomas’ memoir regards his story as a discussion of ethnic and racial identity in the context of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. As Alfredo Sosa-Velasco has summarized, the memoir’s main conflict is Piri’s status as a dark-skinned Puerto Rican who spent a big part of his life passing for “Negro,” while trying to acquire

the validation of a U.S. social system that did not understand his racial nor ethnic background during this time (289).³ In my analysis, I argue that the topic of race as a layer of identity is irrevocably linked to gender, ethnic, and national identity conflicts that take place simultaneously.

In an article from 1972, five years after Thomas' memoir publication, James B. Lane states that the story's unapologetic and realistic narration allows for a better understanding of the fragmented image of Puerto Ricans in New York (814-815). This "fragmented image" can be understood as one perceived as such for those in the social hierarchy who do not belong to a minority population. However, in the memoir, the acknowledgment of this fragmentation belonged not only to those looking down (from top to bottom) and it was also part of the lived experiences of those who shared the bottom space of the social hierarchy as they looked at themselves. Sosa-Velasco explains this issue of fragmentation at different levels when he posits that the act of "guessing was the only way Puerto Ricans could figure out their culture and history" in New York in the 1960s and 1970s (287). This author specifically restricts his statement to the Puerto Ricans of *El Barrio* in Spanish Harlem, and posits that the conjectures produced by guessing were the result of the lack of cultural and historical information on Puerto Rico from the United States education system (287). Born to a Puerto Rican mother and a Cuban father⁴ in Harlem in 1928, N.Y; Thomas' story can be easily recognized as a bildungsroman that centers on this process of *guessing* as the author searches to find his place in the Puerto Rican diaspora and the wider social landscape of New York. "Guessing", as a conflict, is presented on two fronts. The first relates to the relationship between Piri and his domestic environment: his conception of home as a site of heritage education, his mother, and particularly his father. Through the relationship with the home and the father, we see the ineludible trope of paternal acceptance and rebellion against the father figure characteristic of this type of father/son

narratives. The second front presents the social realm (the street) as it becomes a site of contention because of the encounter of identity axes of race and ethnicity that Piri experiences as a racialized (black Latino) subject. Even when this racialization happens on a lower scale in the domestic sphere, this racialization takes a different and substantial form in the social environment which places the protagonist at an intersection of multiple levels of discrimination that affect his identity. If, in the first one, the concepts of home and national identification clash with United States social discourses, in the second one, race becomes an individual conflict (of racial self-recognition) that contends with ethnicity, gender, and nationality. In all of them, as Lane has stated, take place “a combustible mixture of unique instincts, parental and cultural values, and environmental attitudes adapted to survive and achieve a sense of manhood in East Harlem” (815).

These “environmental attitudes” that Lane describes, relate to spatial distinctions that Piri makes of different sites in New York as he changes his adaptation strategies when he inhabits them. My analysis will focus first in understanding this arrangement of *spaces* because, as I see it, they reveal Thomas’ vision of the configuration of urban locations as sites in which identities are distributed and constructed. Following Antonio Gramsci’s conceptualization of urban/private sites and Michel de Certeau’s theory of subject enunciation in urban sites, I propose that Piri’s life becomes a series of movements between multiple (and battling) performances of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in order to fit in in the many spaces in which he finds himself. I call these performances *diasporic positioning* because they serve as a strategy of adaptation resulting from the tensions of contact zones, and speak of the location in which many migrants find and place themselves psychologically, physically, and spiritually. I propose that in this context of diasporic positioning, Thomas’ memoir formulates the following argument: identities are not fixed and are in constant mutability.

The second part of the analysis will focus in Thomas' representation of home as a site of education of the ancestral land. For this analysis is important to remember the ideas I put forth in the Introduction of this dissertation in which I see *home* as a site where notions of the nation are transferred through heritage education. As I mentioned there, disidentification from *home* works as a symbolic disconnection from hegemonic discourses of the homeland. What is particular of this memoir is that Thomas—contrary to Esmeralda Santiago—does not show a gradual disentanglement with the native land in front of the reader. Instead, the disidentification attitudes towards the ancestral land developed at some unidentified point in his life before the beginning of his story. My analysis focuses in identifying the instances in which new disconnections are present. I argue that both Piri's mother and father play different roles in aiding identification; the mother is the purveyor of heritage education, and the father promotes hybrid and performative stances that inform disidentification.

In the final analysis we move from the domestic environment into the streets—where most of the memoir takes place. In this part we see how Piri struggles to conciliate the different axes of his identity: gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. As Piri moves between different locales and social groups, we witness how these spaces become sites of contention in which questions of identity are produced. I argue that the multiple performances produced by diasporic positioning lead to shifts in Piri's loyalties: abandoning an assumed identity to appropriate a new one. In my reading below I will follow Thomas' story chronologically in order to map the way Piri etches different identities as he moves between spaces. Throughout the analyses I contend that the malleability of identification (whether related to gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality) offer something else hidden beneath that personal struggle: the *place* of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico in Thomas' memoir is uprooted and dismissed as the entity that transmits racial, national and other identity notions for a diasporic subject. This distance discloses a heavily marked

disidentification with the homeland. Consequently, these processes of disentanglement facilitate the formation of a diasporic subjectivity that fits, albeit on the margins, within the boundaries of the new host society.

Down These Mean Streets follows Piri in the Hispanic section of Harlem and Long Island as he faces the realities of poverty, drugs, crime, racism, and gang warfare that eventually lead him to prison. As a story of identity formation in the face of racial and ethnic prejudice, the memoir⁵ becomes even more relevant if we consider that these events developed as the Puerto Rican community in New York started to take form. In this sense, the teenaged Puerto Rican diasporic culture in formation seems to be, in a way, symbolically represented in Piri because both are trying to find their *place* within the urban and social landscape of the city.⁶ A recurring theme in literatures of migration is the relevance of the *place* in which individuals move and subjectivities are developed. In *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literatures* (2009), Dalia Kandiyoti states that a sense of place of the diaspora relates to the enclosure of the place of migration (from border towns to urban “ghettos”) that work as a theme throughout U.S. migration literature (6). Kandiyoti takes the idea of *place* even further by describing it as a category that, along with race, gender, sexuality, and class, articulates and shapes migration and diaspora identities. The identity effects of *place*, the author argues, come from its position as the putative inverse of *displacement* because, if the latter is key to diaspora identities, the former allows the knowledge and power gathered by spatial situatedness (3-24). The knowledge and power of places are, according to Daniel D. Arreola, ones that vary for Hispanics/Latinos because their spatial distribution reveal different cultural identities that exhibits their heterogeneity along with country/culture of origin, length of time in the United States, and interactions with non-Hispanic societies (1-35). I would like to bring this aspect of place to the

analysis of *Down These Mean Streets* in order to ascertain the relevance affixed to different spaces throughout the narrative and how they influence diasporic positioning. For example, Thomas organizes his memoir in 8 parts, each of them corresponding to different spaces. As such, we move with Piri back and forth from “Harlem,” “Suburbia” (Long Island), “Down South,” “Prison,” and “New York Town.” Similarly, and perhaps systematically, the narrator also ensures to highlight the boundaries in these areas. For instance, the space of Harlem is divided: “split up in different sections, like the Italian section and Irish and Negro and the Puerto Rican section” (100). In Puerto Rican Harlem we encounter the realms of the home (domestic) and the outside (the *street* and the neighborhood), in which each one opposes the other and each offers a different knowledge to the protagonist. I argue that this methodical organization of places/spaces not only serves the purpose of showing a simple dissection of the city’s landscape, but also serves as a representation of the segmentation of the character’s psyche. It serves to present a self-regulating gesture in which identity and behavior is influenced by space. As such, we see that the conflicts that arise while the family is at home in Harlem relate to the native land, and when the family moves to an Italian neighborhood and then to Long Island ethnic and racial problems emerge. In each of these settings Piri adjusts his behavior as class and social rules become apparent. However, as the narration continues, these conflicts are eventually delocalized and the systematic and thematic divisions are subsequently blurred as disparate identity conflicts begin to blend. For example, in the first chapters the author unpacks Piri’s relationship with his mother and father, the poverty that is part of his upbringing, his search for acceptance from the father, and his relationship with Puerto Rico as taught by his mother. Later, when he is searching for answers about his black heritage, the acceptance of the father and the place Puerto Rico has in his heritage reappear and take another form and definition.

Thomas' representations of spaces begins outside, on the street at two in the morning with a 12-year-old Piri, who has ran away from home after his father blamed and hit him for fighting with his brother. Opening with this escape, Thomas immediately opposes the two sites I identified: the domestic and the street. This highlights two things: first, Piri's father as the patriarchal leader at home, and second, the "mean street" of the memoir's title in the form of roads, city blocks, and neighborhoods. Both the father and the street, exist in two separate dimensions for Piri. This division will continue even after Piri embraces the street completely later in the memoir, and the father disappears from the narration. If the father figure suggests an authoritative force whose nature is to instill order and guidance; the latter represents a freedom that is not yet experienced for the child until the very moment of the escape. The escape from home and from the father can critically be considered an act of defiance in the face of authority, a form of transgression that opposes patriarchal structures. However, in this opening there is no context or reference through which we can sustain a reading of domestic power relations. In fact, the inspiration for Piri's decision to run away from home is to get his father's attention—rather than subvert his rule—as evidenced when he returns home, his father ignores that he had left, and Piri states, "[a]ll that running away for nothing" (6). We discover as Piri gets older that the conflicts in the father-son relationship are not directly related to an imbalance of power between the two. Rather, it relates to the lack of acknowledgement of their racial similarities: the father's attempt to ignore his own black heritage and the (possible) resentment towards his son's race, who needs to recognize his own blackness in order to evaluate his conflicts of identity. (Lane 816). The distance between father and son mirrors the distance between home and the street that Piri is about to embrace. This distance corresponds with a separation of interest: the need of the son to be acknowledged (and learn) of this diasporic environment, and the father's disconnection to his son's needs in terms of subject formation. Consequently, what we witness at the beginning

of the memoir is the representation of the generational gap between father and son (the “us” vs. “them”), and the way each generation processes the social conditions of migrants and their positions as migrant subjects.

This generational gap is evident in the presentation of the street and how it inserts the poles of the private (home/father) versus the public spheres into the narrative. This opposition, however, transcends Manichean moral attitudes and result in more intimate and conflictive political identity struggles. In the Gramscian sense (*Prison Notebooks*), the escape from home and the migration to the street begins the process of social acknowledgment, the (un) conscious hegemonic structuring of the urban space. This organization is produced by Piri’s act of walking out of the house that recalls Michel de Certeau’s view of spatial practices in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), in which pedestrians assign new meanings to the utopian and urbanistic discourses in which cities have been founded. Because of this, de Certeau suggests to *walk* in the city, rather than *view* it because the act of walking inscribes a subjective use of the urban space. Coincidentally, the first line of *Down These Mean Streets*’ first chapter opens with Piri observing the city from a rooftop and saying: “Wanna know how many times I’ve stood on a rooftop and yelled out to anybody: ‘Hey, World—here I am. Hallo, World—this is Piri. That’s me’” (ix). Watching from above is, as we see in Piri’s self-introduction to the world, linked to a request of recognition (which will be tied to his race later on) that will continue when his viewpoint changes as he starts watching and *walking* the street from below. The relevance of Thomas’ approach to urban spaces lies in his acknowledgement of its social and ethnic sites (the political geography of the city), and their imprints in his identity layers. At the same time, because of the city’s hegemonic configuration, the act of Piri’s walk inserts the “re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded”—those “waste” products that do not accommodate to the organization of the city (de Certeau 94-95). In my view, this fact turns the narrative from an

introspective and individual writing process charged with social overtones, to a critique of the systematization of hegemonic urban planning and social structuring around migrant communities. If, as de Certeau explains, the pedestrian of a city creates new meanings to places different from the originally intended for them, Piri's realization of these urban limits establishes not only a new meaning for the city, but also the recognition that city limits created by hegemony imposes on migrants.⁷ This is evident when Piri makes a distinction for Park Avenue—one of the most affluent sections of the city—indicating that there is Park Avenue and *Harlem* Park Avenue when talking about the area (4). This need for clarification aims to draw a class line that speaks of his acknowledgement of the urban layout.

However, spaces Piri can access during this escape are limited because of his age, which limits the distance of his walk, and this short walk restricts his gaze. He tells us that he ran away from home, but not from Harlem (4) and this short walk only provides a fraction of the full meaning he can create of his surroundings. However, this fraction is enough to awaken the understanding that his reality is demarcated by specific boundaries that are beginning to be revealed. The racial boundary is the one that, eventually, is highlighted the most. Before any of this, he would need to understand and process other borders created at the home that relate to national links and the affiliations to his ancestral land. Only then he can venture to the street and the neighborhood, to see Harlem, Long Island, and the country's South, in order to get a perspective of United States as a whole. As I argue, crossing these borders will provide Piri with particular set of rules and understandings of these different spaces. The social politics of these spaces will supply him with the organizational codes of race, ethnicity, and nationality. By walking and crossing these borders Piri is simultaneously creating a personal meaning of the city while the city is also creating a meaning in him as it conditions him to his position as a migrant,

black, and Puerto Rican. These acknowledgements of social difference mold Piri's visions of the homeland, race, and ethnicity as they ignite questions that will produce disidentifying stances.

Disidentification, as I have conceptualized it in this project, is more evident on the second chapter of the memoir as Piri returns home from the street. Titled 'Puerto Rican Paradise,' this chapter presents an amicable conversation between Piri, his mother, and his siblings about the island of Puerto Rico. As a space that influences national, racial, and ethnic self-perceptions brought by what I call in the Introduction as *heritage education*, the ancestral land determines the migrant's reality facilitating or restraining the levels of physical or emotional adaptation to the new host place and society. The location the place of origin occupies in the psyche of the migrant is that intimate spot which is both sublime and conflictive. The depth of the heritage education defines the intensity of the relationship (ties and filiations) between subject and ancestral land. This metric of intensity with the homeland is what determines the measurement by which a migrant approaches the homeland as a physical and/or emotional site. In Thomas memoir we would have to ask: What role does Puerto Rico play as a place of origin for the migrants presented by the author? How is Puerto Rico perceived from the point of view of Piri's mother, his siblings, and himself? I propose that for Piri and his siblings Puerto Rico is not presented as a physical space, but instead as a site constricted to memories of memories. In other words, Puerto Rico is conceptualized through remembrances transmitted from the mother that they have absorbed and reproduce as stories, but whose meaning cannot be decoded by them because it is not based on their experiences.

To put this argument in context, it is important to establish the juxtaposition between Harlem (the site of Piri's experience in the United States) and Puerto Rico (as represented in this chapter). Set in December 1941, before the Pearl Harbor attack, this chapter describes the family gathered in their apartment during a cold winter night after Piri's escape the night before. The

class undertone presented on the previous chapter—with the reference to Harlem Park Avenue—is repeated here as an initial set up for the contrasts between Puerto Rico and the United States. This is presented through the conversation of the cold night in New York, the lack of heat in the apartment, and the reminiscences of Puerto Rico’s hot weather. Of that moment Piri describes:

We drank hot cocoa and talked about summertime. Momma talked about Puerto Rico and how great it was, and how she’d like to go back one day, and how it was warm all the time there and no mater how poor you were over there, you could always live on green bananas, *bacalao*, and rice and beans. “*Dios mío*,” she said, “I don’t think I’ll ever see my island again. (9)

From the beginning, as in many other narratives of migration, the conversation about the homeland is developed through figurative language, showcasing as a handicap the impossibility of discussing the ancestral land in a literal sense. The images of warmth and coldness for Puerto Rico and United States respectively, serve as a vehicle that juxtaposes both countries and, by distancing them, places them in different semantic fields for the children. The mother adds to this conversation “I like *los Estados Unidos*, but it’s sometimes a cold place to live—not because of the winter and the landlord not giving heat but because of the snow in the hearts of the people” (10). In this statement, warmth and coldness both suggest states that have meaning beyond the context of the weather and are symbolically extended to refer to attitudes and idiosyncrasies of peoples of the United States’ as perceived by the mother—a first-generation migrant. Similar to perceptions of the first generation in other narratives of migration, here lingers the ideal and impossibility of return. Piri’s position as an observer of her mother’s reminiscences locates him at distance from her, mirroring the distance he feels between him and his father. In addition to these representations, here we have references to socio-economic class that suggest differences in wealth (economic and physical) between the two countries. This is the result of the poverty traces left by the Great Depression in the United States the decade before that affected not only immigrants, but also the country’s population in general. The comparison of both countries’

socio-economic situations proposes a binary opposition that, instead of creating a negative vs. positive arrangement, aims to provide the stances and places in which both mother and children will situate themselves as the conversation continues. As readers, this allows us to understand the characters' logics and intentions when they lean towards one or the other space. As Piri indicates:

Moms copped that we-eyed look and began to dream-talk about her *isla verde*, Moses' land of milk and honey.

When I was a little girl," she said, "I remember getting up in the morning and getting the water from the river and getting the wood for the fire and the quiet of the greenlands and the golden color of the morning sky, the grass wet from the *lluvia* ... *Ai, Dios*, the *coquís* and the *pajaritos* making all the *música....*" (9)

As we see, Piri acknowledges the idealization of Puerto Rico for the mother. He associates it to the biblical paradise by alluding to Moses, which presents the mother's reverence to the island as spiritual—thus relating her devotion to myth. What is of importance in this description is that, for Piri, this myth is not presented as a foundational myth in which he can understand his own heritage. The ironic tone behind Piri's description of his mother's reminiscences solidifies the distance of what he perceives as reality for mother and himself.

A similar example of this distance is represented in the linguistic context when Piri's sister, Miriam, says to her mother, "Tell us, tell us all about Porto Rico," and her mother replies "It's not Porto Rico, it's *Puerto Rico*" (9). The linguistic deviation presented in this passage amplifies the scope of the distance I have been discussing when placed in its historical context. The grammatical form of Porto Rico used by Miriam is the same as the one used in the Americanization campaign, which took place on the island after the United States invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898. In this campaign the U.S. colonial government implemented English as the official language to be used in the school system in order to inculcate U.S. values, and changed the name of the island to *Porto Rico*. (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 40-41). By placing this

politically charged grammatical form in Miriam's voice, Thomas articulates a reconstitution of the self that denationalizes history and contextualizes an alternate point of view for this generation regarding their ancestral past. Therefore, as the mother offers memories of Puerto Rico to her children, they gather to listen as if she was telling a children's tale. Piri's narration of the moment reassembles the experience of learning about the ancestral land as a fantasy while simultaneously portraying the mother's perception of Puerto Rico as something they do not share and something with which they cannot identify. This is evident when Piri refers to these stories as *her* memories and does not show any interest to understand them beyond the intention of knowing them (9). These highlights of difference and disentanglement convey that the mother's "*isla verde*" is not necessarily *theirs*, thus creating a gap between the provider and recipients of the heritage education.

One particular aspect of this moment when mother and children share memories is the absence of the father. As Piri explains, he had been working and arrives home, interrupting the conversation and, as such, the presentation of heritage education. I see both parental figures as entities that carry the responsibility of the heritage education and, similarly, represent past hegemonic discourses that are carried with them in the dislocation passage as well. At this point in the narrative, Piri's evolving identity is a direct result of his ongoing conflict between the memories of the motherland (Puerto Rico) and those of the pater/father/fatherland (race, masculinity, outsider). However, it is interesting that in this scene from Piri's family, the father figure takes a turn as an agent who aids the children in identifying their own niche in the diasporic space. This attitude I speak of is more obvious because of its gradual representation through a series of disruptions that lead to an education in assimilation.

The first of three interruptions takes place during the conversation between the mother and the children about Puerto Rico. Embedded with the nostalgic and idealized presentation of

the country there is a class and race overtone that contextualizes the bases of the myths of the ancestral land. The children ask their mother if she was poor in Puerto Rico to which she replies that she was, but that poverty was bearable (as opposed to the United States) because in Puerto Rico “those around you share *la pobreza* with you and they love you, because only poor people can understand poor people” (10). When Piri hears this, he asks his mother if it was true whether their people had money or land, hoping that his “ancestors were noble princes born in Spain” (10). By equating class and race together linked with Spain in this conversation, Piri is able to subtly chronicle the history of dislocations, exiles, and migrations of Hispanic peoples. In addition, if we consider the prevalence black identification will have in his subject formation later, he tangentially registers the history of displacement for African peoples. Piri’s need to confirm an affluent (and white) European past speaks of his need to claim an identity that will ease his adaptation process in the United States. However, the father’s disruption of this conversation begins when he “came into the kitchen and brought all the cold with him” (10) and begins to complain about the economic state of the nation, which he blames on the Depression still lingering in Harlem. By doing this, the father transfers these themes of poverty and race in Puerto Rico to the United States and, with Piri’s reference to the cold he brought with him, introduces the polarization of Puerto Rico and the United States.

Consequently, for the children, the density of the mother's reminiscences of the homeland and the disruption on the part of the father contextualizes and connects the myth of the ancestral land and the diaspora experience along with a reflection of economic and identity issues providing the reader with a clearer definition of identity. For example, while listening to a conversation between the mother and his father about the economic situation of the family, Piri interjects with: “And Miriam, James, José, Paulie, and me just looking and thinking about snowballs and Puerto Rico and summertime in the street and whether we were gonna live like

this forever and not know enough to be sorry for ourselves” (11). The oxymoronic images of “snowballs and Puerto Rico” and summertime in the middle of the winter highlights transcultural wedges and intricate hybrid experiences that are intertwined in the children’s reality. The processing of information on both sides of the Puerto Rico/New York City poles is summarized with this statement, as the children synthesize their affective links and balance understandings of both places. At the end, Piri provides another image of consolidation to show how he is able to come to terms with the conflictive relationship between generations and spaces. He writes that as the family is talking in the kitchen that the temperature felt warmer: “like being all together made it like we wanted it to be” (11-12). This transition between the cold which is brought with the father and the feeling of warmth as they gather together in the kitchen suggests an accommodation of conflicts, an intermediate ground (in-between) in which both generations can harmonize each other each other’s understandings of their surroundings. This place in the diaspora is not warm (as in Puerto Rico) or cold (as in New York), but rather a warmer/neutral space between the two.

The meeting ground reached in the kitchen however, is abruptly interrupted by a blunt and raw description of the father going to the bathroom: “Poppa made it into the toilet and we could hear everything he did, and when he finished, the horsey gurgling of the flushed toilet told us he’d soon be out” (12). This second interruption, though short and described through images of sound, is relevant considering the context of the discussion that preceded it. Carefully choosing what sounds to highlight and the images it produces in the reader, the narrator humorously and figuratively reassociates and opposes with defecation the themes of generational difference and acquired harmony. *Scatology*, as a literary trope, has been understood in critical analysis through the ideas put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin of the grotesque body in which, in principle, it represents the degradation of ideals of pureness. In *Rabelais and His World* (1968),

Bakhtin ties the concept of human anatomy to political conflicts in the interaction between the social and the literary as a commentary of social hierarchies, mandates, and systems, which are in turn upended. Thomas, with the father in the bathroom, disharmonizes the integrative sense the family achieved in the kitchen by presenting the first generation (figuratively) defecating the moment where the second generation has accomplished an acceptance of their in-between state. Seen through Bakhtin's critical lens, the process of hybridization would then be considered (however ironically) the "pure" component of this equation because it has now been defecated upon. Consequently, we can see this narration as a commentary on the recognition of hybridity as a legitimate form of identity for migrants because by the end of the memoir Piri recognizes all elements that influence his personal identity. Bakhtin states that the essence of the grotesque is to: "present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction of the old (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better" (62). This is possible, he argues, because bodily parts and their functions (including those that produce degrading materials) are linked to those of reproduction, thus bridging degradation with renewal. In Thomas' memoir we witness this moment of renewal—"of something new and better"—after the father's defecation. This moment symbolically begins immediately after the father comes out of the bathroom and continues until the moment Piri leaves the home, embraces the street and the outside world, and culminates with the acceptance of his identity at the end. Nonetheless, before heading to the streets (which sequentially takes place after this family reunion), the renewal takes the form of another interruption from the father.

While his father is in the bathroom, Piri and his brothers James and José huddle around the radio "like Indians" to listen to Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy (12).⁸ This act of listening to the radio is, in itself, a consumption of culture. However, the way they "huddle like

Indians” to listen to an American boy, presents a symbolic crossing of ethnicities that moves the reader further away from Puerto Rico. This move from the Puerto Rican heritage, to the Native American, and to the American heritages introduces a recurring theme in the memoir: the multiple and convoluted axes of identity within acculturation processes. Once the father has had dinner, he suggests to the children that, instead of listening to Jack Armstrong, they should play “Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour” (12). *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* was in the 1930s and 1940s one of the most popular radio broadcasts in the United States, and it consisted of a talent show in which contestants would be measured by their singing acts. This suggestion is important because of the nature of the game. Considering the ethnically charged context throughout this family episode—and the children’s hybrid interpretations—suggesting a game based on acts and stages is captivating because it is my contention that by proposing the game the father symbolically suggests the act of staging and performance as a response to identity search in the second generation’s needs. This is made apparent because, as the father suggests the game, all of the animosity Piri had described so far towards him disappears: “*Gee, Pops, you’re great . . . you’re the swellest, the bestest Pops in the whole world, even though you don’t understand us too good*” (sic) (12). This passage temporarily resolves the request for attention from the father on the part of the son, while at the same time discovers that Piri’s need from attention is linked to an urgency of guidance in terms of hybrid sensibilities. Despite father and son differences, this bond created between the first generation and the second because of the admittance of performance permeates the rest of the chapter. By doing so, Thomas softens hegemonic representation of the homeland and the father figure, placing in him the processes of guidance and acceptance of acculturation. In essence, what we see in this episode through the mother and the father’s portrayals is how performance trumps heritage education. *Performance* will continue throughout Piri’s life, aiding in his diasporic positioning as a strategy of adaptability as he moves

through different spaces. The relevance of performativity is so that in this same episode Piri's capability for it is established as he is called a great actor (15). It is also symbolic that in the game he assumes the role of the host of the show, Major Bowes (12). In this context Piri's performance of a performer who judges performances gives him a fictive agency that transcends the fantasy of the game in particular and the narrative in general. This fact will also determine, as the memoir develops, the way he will judge the ethnic and racial positions of other people in addition to his own identity. By bringing *performativity* to the realities of the migrant experiences, Thomas gives insight of the subject's strategies of assimilation and adaptability after disidentification has been established.

Thomas not only addresses the identity conflicts of the members of the second generation, but also incorporates the first-generation migrants as well. For example, Piri's father, as a representation of homeland paternalist discourses, criticizes his own representation through defecation, as well as when he becomes the purveyor of performativity as a resolution to adaptation conflicts. As such, the author turns patriarchal discourses against themselves, delegitimizing their scope in the diaspora and widening the options and assistances for assimilation and integration. This serves as a critique of the inherited power structures from home by bringing out their irrelevance in the new host society, and approving the disregard attitude of the second generation toward homeland discourses. This position of the father as an agent of assimilation education sets him in opposition to the mother's role as the bearer of heritage education. As such, what could be the *motherland* for the children now becomes the *mother's land*. The father's interruption of heritage education in this episode highlights the marginalization of the mother. This marginalization uncovers the distance and disconnection of the children from the mother and reveals disidentification succinctly. I concur with Lane when he proposes that even when Piri worshipped his mother, he "thought her reveries about Puerto

Rico and her ethical and religious admonitions were irrelevant to his own life” (815). For Lane, Mrs. Thomas realized that child-rearing in an environment like Harlem “was fraught with irreconcilable difficulties” because the tools that she could give them were based in values that utilized Puerto Rico as a social reference and, as such, would not survive in that culture of the street in which they were living (817). The levels of disentanglement with the homeland observed in the interactions between Piri and his mother will continue, as we will see, throughout the memoir in the form of conflicts of racial and ethnic identity. In Piri’s personal experience outside of the home, Puerto Rico, as a topic, is no longer mentioned in the story. The few instances in which Puerto Rico is mentioned and briefly explored after this family meeting occur exist in order to link the mother’s understanding of the social structure of the United States to her national references from the past, but not Piri’s relationship with the island.⁹ As a physical, ancestral, or emotional place, Puerto Rico will transform into an inherited ethnic heritage. Contrary to what we have seen in my reading of Esmeralda Santiago (in which we see how cultural items from the island are systematically reworked from the diaspora) in Thomas we do not see a gradual transformation of the perceptions of the nation. Instead, from the beginning we are confronted with a migrant generation that, as children, already disidentify with their ancestral land. The disidentification with what the mother represents also reveals that the domestic space of the home is not free from identity conflicts even when the homeland is recursively played as part of the heritage education. Furthermore, *home*—as a concept of unity and past values—loses meaning and results in the subjects moving away from it. This family scene ends with Piri stating that “[e]verybody got candy and eats and thought how good it was to be together, and Moms thought that it was wonderful to have such a good time even when she wasn’t in Puerto Rico where the grass was wet with *lluvia*” (12). With this statement the drama caused by the tensions of differences between generations is summarized as such: the heritage land, in the form of the

mother, is still something foreign to the children. However, the differences are diminished by the fact that all of them are together as a family despite their differences.

As the narrative moves forward from this scene it shifts outside of the home and turns to the streets as a continuation of Piri's identity development. This time he is searching for his place in the wider Puerto Rican diaspora—along with a definition of his Puerto Ricanness—and, eventually, his place in the racial map of the United States. Piri's first time out of the domestic environment introduces him to other children on the block. Outside, he describes, is “a sort of science” because “[y]ou have a lot to do and a lot of nothing to do” (14). It is also a science because he needs to learn the codes through which the neighborhood operates, as well as the social rules by which he is now integrating into this space for the first time. The social activities in which he engaged with other kids refer to the initiation requirements in order to be accepted by other peers in addition to playing baseball on the street and chasing girls. These processes of induction and fraternity into social membership give him the knowledge of the codes in which the street functions. It also gives him a clear idea of the space he has in the city. During his first escape at the beginning of the memoir he stated that he “had run away from home but not from Harlem” (4). Harlem (Spanish or Black) fits the ethical, moral, physical, and idiosyncratic characteristics that make him feel socially comfortable. This explains why he does not venture outside of those limits. At this point in the narrative the family home is replaced with the street as home. As such, the heritage education of the home is transformed into a street education. By abandoning the traces of homeland education of the domestic space, he moves around Harlem and this wider space becomes the only places to which he gravitates at different times in his life. Leaving the domestic space of the home and his introduction to street life is not accomplished with a total disconnection from the home. The recognition and attention Piri craved from the father is mirrored by the acceptance he needs from the other children in the neighborhood.

Bildungsroman narratives with a male central character often highlight the importance of masculinity as a mark of gender identity development. At first, Piri makes this point by describing how he models his identity through his father: "Poppa's the same like me, a stone Puerto Rican" (28). This form of masculinity is related to male-to-male intimacy: strength, steadiness, force and fearlessness, which form the backbone of the traits that Piri defines as needed to showcase masculinity, but also loyalty, allegiance, and dependability. Similar to the masculine performance that his father, symbolically, instructed to him before he moves to the streets, Piri focuses on the gender performance of this masculinity, understanding that it is

part of becoming *hombre*, of wanting to have a beard to shave, a driver's license, a draft card, a "stoneness" which enabled you to go into a bar like a man. Nobody really digs a kid. But a man-cool. Nobody can tell you what to do – and nobody better. You'd smack him down like Whiplash does in the cowboy flick or really Light him up like Scarface in that gangster picture. (15-16)

In this case, the popular culture references Thomas uses to represent masculinity—the gangster and the cowboy—are based on gender codes of the United States' popular culture and do not belong to the realm of masculine figures of his Latino-Afro-Caribbean heritage conventions (i.e. his father). Here we see a distance from the "Latino" masculinity and an acculturation to American masculine social conventions through the appropriation of American symbols of masculinity. However, the options of the gangster (*Scarface*) and cowboy (Whiplash) are, in themselves, conflictive when considering the history of their representation in popular culture. For example, when Thomas refers to *Scarface*, he is referring to the 1932 movie that follows the story of Antonio Camamonte, an Italian Mafioso who aims to take control of the city's alcohol illegal distribution in 1920's Chicago. Antonio's ascent to power, however, requires him to attack the Irish gangs of the north side of the city. Similarly to the image of the gangster, the representation of the cowboy (Whiplash) as a sign of American masculinity was etched in the minds of the masses through the production of the Western movie genre and Wild

West shows in the early 20th century. In these films the cowboy not only opposed violent gunslingers, but also Native Americans. Both forms of masculinity performance are Caucasian in origin and even when this presents disentanglement with masculinist prototypes of his Caribbean heritage, what it is interesting here is the relationship of these symbols of masculinity as they relate to other minorities. On one hand we encounter the “ideal gangster” who models a masculinity who does not require a woman and whose focus is to be concerned about his fellow men (Larke-Walsh 180). This gangster, as represented in the movie, present traces of discrimination towards the Irish, a tradition carried from the 19th century when the Irish were classified as racialized subjects. Similarly, the cowboy, as portrayed in many cultural productions, attacks the ethnically marginalized group of Native Americans. As we will see, the rejection of Irish and Native Americans produced by these two adopted symbols of masculinity anticipates Piri’s racial and ethnic conflict as a racialized subject and encapsulates his experience within different areas of identity formation as he steps into the street. The gangster and the cowboy are the cultural masculine models that Piri has known, the ones that he grew up with, that once on the street replace the gender traits he learned from the father. Etching a Caucasian American form of masculinity on to a black, Puerto Rican body is, in this context, not conflictive with his ancestral heritage because it serves the purpose for which he reproduces it. As a form of diasporic positioning it helps him gain acceptance in an environment where second-generation migrants from different nationalities, ethnicities, and races, are modeled by the same American models of masculinity. In turn, though he has not received the full recognition of his masculinity that he needs from his father, he is able to win acceptance from his peers on the street and, from his own perspective, from his community. His level of admission to the group is such that he reaches a degree of comfort that leads him to proclaim: “This is my block” (17). This statement

shows how Piri found his niche in the migrant urban layout by performing a masculinity that separated (even if mirrored) that from the father.

Gender conflicts alone are not the only identity struggle Piri encounters on the streets. For Thomas, finding a place within the national or ethnic migrant group does not complete/resolve the process of diasporic subjectivity. In Piri's case, a diasporic identity will be discovered through the resolution of the conflicts generated when race, ethnicity and nationality collide. The lines between these modes of identity will blur and Piri will resort to a series of strategic performances in order to find his place within the city's racial and ethnic landscape. For Piri, his black race in the domestic realm did not seem to be conflictive and it even was surrounded in acceptance. Piri recognizes this acceptance from his mother when he says "Aw, Moms, you love me any way I am, clean or dirty, white or black, pretty or ugly." To which his mother playfully responds "*Sí*, you're right, and, my son, I have to love you because only your mother could love you, *un negrito* and ugly" (19). By calling him "*un negrito*" the mother acknowledges a difference between Piri and his siblings, who are all white. On the other hand, Piri wonders if his father's distance was because of his race: "*How come when we all get hit for doing something wrong, I feel it the hardest? Maybe 'cause I'm the biggest, huh? Or maybe it's because I'm the darkest in this family*" (22). Even as this quote presents a conflict of racial consciousness, this statement is distinctly marked by the usage of italics, and appears as if a retrospective analysis of his childhood at the moment of writing (after he developed a racial consciousness) is taking place. At this time Piri shows a racial consciousness that is not necessarily conflictive at home yet and explains why, up to this point, he has never confronted his father about their visibly distinct racial position in the family.

The absence of race as a conflict in Piri's life ends when his father decides to move the family a few blocks north of 111th Street, leaving the Puerto Rican neighborhood and entering

the Italian side of Harlem on 114th Street. What would be considered an insignificant move of three blocks becomes, for Piri, a kind of migration. To Piri, the Italian neighborhood is a “new country” (25); an “alien turf” (24) in which he will discover that the differences between this new space and his former neighborhood are not only racial, ethnic, and/or linguistic but they also inform a new set of behavioral rules unknown to him. By describing neighborhoods as different countries Piri, on the surface, presents cities as spaces that are not integrative and whose ethnic and racial borders create social conflict. These conflicts are foreshadowed when he introduces this city space: “Sometimes you don’t fit in. Like if you’re a Puerto Rican on an Italian block” (24), as well as “I sure missed 111th Street, where everybody acted, walked and talked like me” (24). These statements clearly refer to a realization of difference but they also discover what would become Piri’s signature strategy: the part of *acting* he sees in difference. Even when performing, the “alien turf” becomes a site of contention when the Italian kids harass Piri because of his race. This exchange prompts an awakening of the ethnic and racial consciousness I have been elaborating upon, and also displays the start of a new stage in the development of his diasporic identity.

The first encounter with Italians in the neighborhood begins with one of the kids named Rocky calling him a “fuckin’ spic” (24), and develops through the following exchange,

“Hey, you,” he said. “What nationality are ya?”
I looked at him and wondered which nationality to pick. And one of his friends said, “Ah, Rocky, he’s black enuff to be a nigger. Ain’t that what you is, kid?”
My voice was almost shy in its anger. “I’m Puerto Rican,” I said. “I was born here.” I wanted to shout it, but it came out like a whisper. (24)

Through this dialog we can glimpse at the dynamics of racism in New York of the 1940s, and also at Piri’s logic when it comes to diasporic positioning in these scenarios. First of all, we see that for the other children, like Piri, nationality is the first reference they use as marker of

identity. This is clear when they ask Piri about his nationality; despite assuming he was African-American because of his race. This scenario mirrors Piri's knowledge before turning to the streets; the Italian children are either unaware of the differences between ethnicity and race, or are aware but cannot specifically name these differences. In this exchange the author also suggests nationality as performance, as Piri considers which nationality to pick. This fluidity, in which circumstances allows for malleable identity is repeated later when he lives on Long Island and states that he is "a Puerto Rican from Harlem" (83), as the epigraph of this chapter presented. The distinction made here between being a Puerto Rican *in* Harlem, and being a Puerto Rican *from* Harlem speaks of the spatial relations embedded in diaspora positioning. On the one hand, to say that he *is* Puerto Rican while in Harlem means that he belongs to the island's heritage, while considering and highlighting the Puerto Ricans in New York as a cohesive national community that forms part of the city's migrant landscape. That is why he feels the need to clarify that, though he is Puerto Rican, he was born "here," hoping the adverb gives the others a sense of belonging and fraternal relatability. On the other hand, by stating that one is a Puerto Rican *from* Harlem in the context of Long Island addresses a different kind of identification; one that separates Puerto Rico as an island and treats the nationality as the heritage of people who belong and are part of the city. Piri's conception of his nationality in the Italian neighborhood and Long Island, however, is an attempt to hide his race and not be mistaken for an African American. As Lane stated: "Like many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, for a while he emphasized his Latin heritage to differentiate himself from Negroes" (820). Later in the narrative, because of this, Piri started to model and imitate what he called the "style" of African Americans: "I went, walking in the style which I had copped from the colored cats I had seen, a swinging and stepping down hard at every step" (30) in order to gain respect and instill fear in the Italian kids.

This performance of blackness is, in itself, a stereotype that discloses for Piri the notion that race can be performed in the same way nationality can be switched.

The second encounter with the Italian kids, however, took a violent turn when Piri decided to confront them. In the argument that ensues, racist comments exchanged from side to side and ended with a physical altercation. In the end, Piri lands in the hospital, blinded because one of the kids threw dirt in his eyes. I see this trope of blindness in the context of national, racial, and ethnic performance important since it relates to self-visual perceptions. Figuratively, ending sightless after trying to impersonate a nationality and a race, addresses the impossibility of passing as something and/or someone else because of a lack of self-recognition. As we will see when he travels to the Jim Crow South, Piri will recognize that identities are not a matter of temporary performance, but rather they carry a history that is beyond the present time, place, and circumstances.

After this incident with the Italian children (but not necessarily because of it), the family decides to move back to Spanish Harlem. At this time Piri is “gang age,” which means that “[e]ven when the block belongs to your own people, you are still an outsider who has to prove himself a down stud with heart” (47) in order to belong. Thomas uses the topic of gang membership to further develop Piri’s need for belonging that started with his search of the father’s attention. Through gang initiation—in which Piri had to prove to his peers that he was tough and had “mucho corazón” (48)—Thomas juxtaposes the ideas of belonging to family at home with belonging to this new family on the street. We observe that the closer Piri gets to his peers in the gang, the further away he moves from his family, as such, the incursion of a new interpretation of *family* turns the street into a new home. Belonging to this “streetdom’s elite” (51) forms a new sense of class identity within the neighborhood and, at the same time, develops a new articulation of Puerto Rican identity. As a nationality, being Puerto Rican does not give

him free membership to the gang because he is still considered an outsider, even when the block belongs to Puerto Ricans. As a result, the notion of Puerto Ricanness of the gang is presented as a new configuration of Puerto Rican identity. If neighborhoods are described as countries, this return to Harlem and the acceptance within the gang subculture is a new form of figurative national membership—and is one that needs to be gained and defended violently if necessary. Consequently, violence, as one of the distinctive patterns of gang subculture, becomes one of the behaviors that will work as a signature idiosyncrasy of this new national Puerto Rican articulation of membership. I argue that this sense of belonging to a symbolic family is determined, primarily, by space, which is why it creates difference, even between Puerto Ricans. The idea of difference through space is so ingrained in the gang's psyche that even Piri's gang fights for territory with another Puerto Rican gang in another neighborhood. Of this, he indicates that "[t]hey were Puerto Ricans just like we were, but this didn't mean shit, under our need to keep our reps" (52). The rationale for defiance shows that the logics of affiliations go beyond kinship ties. That nationality, race, or ethnicity is irrelevant in this context places *space* as the signifying marker that defines diasporic subjectivity and that identity shifts and flows depending on where one is located. Therefore, for Piri, being *in* this symbolic nationality (the place of violence) and belonging to the group is the same. This shapes a "national identity" that is distanced from the one learned through the heritage education and the acculturation brought by the father, or even the one he assumes on the street before becoming accepted by the gang.

Concurrently with the group's acceptance, another aspect of identity arises in Piri's relationship with the gang-family: the one related to sexual orientation. Earlier I have mentioned that Piri's references for masculinity came from American popular culture and this means a separation between masculinist views from the heritage past through the father. The need for acceptance from the father—displayed as an urgency to be accepted as a man—is also a

requirement for his and his father's racial acceptance, but this one never comes. On the other hand, the acceptance described under the guise of machismo and bravery, gets resolved the moment Piri confronts the Italian kids and is sent to the hospital. At that moment Piri tries to get the father's attention by describing how he defended himself, to which the father replies by saying "you're *un hombre*" and Piri "felt proud as hell" (38). However, in this new environment created by the gang-family, the codes for defining masculinity are different, broadened, and changed in the same way nationality is shifted and filtered through another lens.

These definitions for masculinity are tackled by Thomas the instant one of Piri's gang associates suggests a visit to the apartment of three homosexuals who lived in the neighborhood. In order to see which of the gang members was "tough," this associate posed invitations to smoke marijuana, drink, get money, and have sex with the men. As Piri explains, they all agree "[c]ause we wanted to belong, and belonging meant doing whatever had to be done" (55). In this context, "whatever had to be done" refers to the social perception that masculinity is in direct correspondence to heterosexuality. With this statement, Piri recognizes that by accepting the invitation, he and his associates are deviating from this social assumption but, in his view, fearlessness in order to be accepted justifies and overruled same sex practices as homosexual desire. In this context, same sex exchanges reveal how the construction of homoeroticism is variable in different social spaces and conditions, even if it goes in opposition to social and cultural normative systems. In this passage we see how, through same sex practices, masculinity deviates from the set of heteronormative behavior that legitimize patriarchy in both Puerto Rico and United States. Antonio Medina-Rivera broadens this reading regarding the deviation from Puerto Rican and United States forms of patriarchy even more by stating that Piri's distance from the father is not only a departing gesture in the tradition of becoming a man, but also an ample representation of an image of masculinity that goes beyond the Latin American "macho" (898-

906). In the diasporic context, I contend, this representation of masculinity aims to showcase how different spaces and social contexts influence identity overall. In other words, Thomas showcases different modes of identification through which we can glance at the diverse ways in which rigid and essentialist social classifications such as masculinity and nationality can be modified. Within this context of shifting identifications masculinity becomes part of the cluster of identity reconfigurations that speak of new diasporic subjectivity formations.

Even when Piri found his niche within the gang-family to which he now belongs, the racial component of his identity remains unresolved. After his family decides to leave Harlem and moves to the city of Babylon on Long Island in 1944, Piri finds himself accommodating layers of his identity again in a different social context: a working class environment. In this new city and class context, Piri will encounter racism and marginalization from the Irish community, and this experience re-awakens Piri's racial consciousness the same way his experiences in the Italian neighborhood did. However, this awakening of racial consciousness needs to be placed in its historical context because it goes in tandem with the African-American experience with racism at the time. In this decade, the African-American society in the United States is slowly fighting against racial ideologies, and their fight will result in the Civil Rights Movement years later. Piri's insertion in this social conflict begins with class and racial performance—as he states, “I play my role to the most” (82)—in order to fit in with these new social structures of Long Island and gain acceptance and integration. This performance strategy to fit in this new environment is, as Barón-Fritts has stated, particularly common for Hispanics in the United States. As she notes: in the pursuit of gaining access to mainstream society and develop a sense of personal worth, many Latinas/os and African Americans find themselves denying their own racial selves in order to belong (34). However, this strategy did not work for Piri and, as Lane

states, “any thoughts about his being assimilated into the white world ended after Long Island” (820).

What I would like to highlight here is the role displacement and movement from one space to another plays in Piri’s national, racial, and ethnic consciousness. Before moving to Long Island, he grew concerned because there were “a lot of paddies out there, and they didn’t dig Negroes or Puerto Ricans,” strengthening his assertion that he belonged in Harlem (81). When he asked his mother if there were Puerto Ricans in Babylon, and his mother mentioned that there was only one other person, Piri responded by saying “I mean a lotta *Latinos*, Moms. Like here in the *Barrio*. And how about *morenos*?” (82). Gradually the differences between the life in Harlem that he knows and what he will encounter on Long Island awakens a realization on national, racial and ethnic levels that develops simultaneously as a social and political consciousness. As the quote above shows, Piri assigns levels of importance to the different identity layers he identify in himself. As such, he moves from a national identity (Puerto Rican), to an ethnic identity (Latinos), and ends with a racial identity (blacks). This example reveals that a national identity may lose meaning if an ethnic or racial identity creates the same bonds of belonging and acceptance for which he strives. In this context of Long Island, his racial identity becomes the third priority of identification after the ethnic label of Latino. Seen together, the three layers establish his knowledge of the minority experience and the social margins in which he is placed.

Piri’s encounter with racism on Long Island leads him to a literal investigation of his racial identity right after his family moves back to Harlem. Upon his return, he “gravitated closer to black friends, not to lose his ethnicity but to find himself racially” (Lane 820). This search of his racial self-identity that brought him closer to African Americans caused him to reject white culture altogether (Lane 820). It is at this point when the racism in his family, which rendered Piri’s blackness invisible, is uncovered (Barón-Fritts 36). The unveiling of this internal, familial

racism is particularly relevant because of Piri's father's blackness. This is a topic that is not discussed until this moment in which Piri is discovering his racial self. This discovery clashes with his father who, Piri observes, rejects his own African heritage by saying that he is native Caribbean and Spanish. (150-51).¹⁰ This is how we discover yet another form of disidentification because, as Piri glances at his African heritage, his gaze—unlike his father's—is not presented as an Afro-Caribbean one, but as a broad configuration of blackness that does not have a *space* or history. His friendship with African-Americans originated because of his need for racial self-recognition but also because of his need to identify with his friends' struggle in the context of United States racism. It is his experiences as black subject what moves him to identify with blacks, leaving aside his national and ethnic identifications. However, even between African-Americans he could not find a space in which to understand his race, and he acknowledges that he began to hate black men because he could feel their pain but believed it should not be his (124). In other words, Thomas positions the black race in the context of diaspora as being one that share the emotional scars of racism but, for African-Americans, this racism was rooted in a history that do not belong to him due to his migrant condition. As such, this “pain that should not be his” relates to forms of racism that take place in different historical contexts outside of the United States. This discovers that his conflict of racial identification stems from not knowing the location of his racial identity. If home was a site in which his racial identity was erased, and he cannot identify with his African-American counterparts, his racial conflict can be summarized as the struggle to allocate his blackness in a social and historical context that do not exist for him in the diaspora. This is why there is no mention of identification with the African heritage in the Puerto Rican context in the memoir. As such he distances and disidentify from both the Puerto Rican and African-American racial histories, even in the moments when he identifies as a black Puerto Rican.

It is at this point when Piri decides to embark on a trip to the Jim Crow South with his friend Brew in order to, as Marta E. Sánchez stated, find himself racially by experiencing the materiality as a “Negro” (120). Of all the experiences he has in the South, Thomas highlights the encounter Piri and Brew have with a college-educated light-skinned African American named Gerald Andrew West. Gerald apposes Piri because, if Piri is a Puerto Rican trying to pass as black, Gerald is a black man who is passing as Puerto Rican (Sosa-Velasco 289). This juxtaposition is deliberate and, as William Luis states, has one narrative and personal goal (for Thomas) related to the act of writing about race (42). One of the particular characteristics of Gerald is that he is writing a book “on the Negro situation,” hoping that the book would show that blacks are working with the whites “toward[s] a productive relationship” (170). Of Gerald’s book Luis posits that Thomas is writing the book his character Gerald wants to write which is, in other words, the history of marginalization to which Thomas was subjected. The aim of this strategy, Luis argues, is to resolve his own identity crisis of being a Puerto Rican born in New York who mainstream American society view as black (Luis 42). To this argument I add that the representation of Gerald as a college-educated character not only legitimizes Thomas’ racial struggles and gives him the platform to write about race, but it also highlights the rhetoric that Thomas needs in order to resolve his racial identity conflict in the narration: When Piri learns that Gerald—whose heritage includes one-eighth black, white, Indian and Spanish—strongly identifies with his Spanish side, Thomas’ introduces the alternative of *choice* as a way to resolve identity crises. Gerald says: “I’m so blended racially that I find it hard to give myself to any... one of the blends. Of course, I feel that the racial instincts that are the strongest in a person enjoying this rich mixture are the ones that ... should be followed” (174). Similarly, when Gerald states, “I have the right to identify with whatever race or nationality approximates my emotional feeling and physical characteristics” (176), Thomas is laying out the direction he will

take in order to resolve his own conflicts. Thus, as the author acknowledged in his interview with Lisa D. McGill, in the search for one's identity, a spiritual or psychological journey back to a cultural heritage is indispensable and, once there, one has to "find. . . the wisdom so you can make the right choice" (184). This "choice" allows Thomas to come to terms with his racial identity by identifying as a "Puerto Rican *moyeto*" (173), relying in *mestizaje* (miscegenation) as a way of racial synchronization. I see this arrival to a self-reconstitution of his racial identity as *mestizo* as a non-combative racial consciousness that harmonizes both the elements of his racial past along with his understanding of blackness in the American context. However, I am aware that *mestizaje* can be contested as combative when it is considered as a political ideology in Latin America because it disavows indigenous and African heritage in order to ratify and prioritize whiteness. I, nonetheless, see *mestizaje* in Thomas as implying a hybrid position in the migrant context that distances itself from the context of Latin America. For example, when asked if a black identity was central to his self-conceptualization, the author replied that he wanted to be accepted as a human being because his heritage was not just black but African, Taíno and Spanish (McGill 182). This racial fluidity allows him to accept an identity that could be easily molded to the social pulls characteristic of multi-ethnic and multi-racial environments. For Thomas, this resolution is a new space in which his memoir becomes the production of a language whose trope spatializes the inscription of his presence in the world (Sosa-Velasco 297). The importance of this language in 1967 lies in the fact that Thomas is able to find a way to reject the paradigms of black or white that dominated racial discourses at the time, even before concepts like hybridity, heterogeneity, and difference gained academic and social repute (Sánchez 119). As such, his distance from the homeland and the diaspora racial discourses come in the form of breaking with the homogenizing forces that labeled him as one particular thing.

After this trip to the South, Piri travels the world because of his job as a seaman for the national Maritime Union. When he is done, he returns to El Barrio. Upon his return, his mother—the only link to his Puerto Rican-island roots—passes away, and he embraces the streets, once again, the only place he has felt at home. This homecoming is both a physical and symbolic return to roots: a return to the place of origin. It is symbolic because, after coming to terms with his black racial identity in the South, it is in Spanish Harlem where he needed to be in order to reconcile the varied Puerto Rican identifications he has grappled with—specifically now that his mother had died. This time, similarly to the way gang membership assigned a new meaning to his Puerto Rican identity before, his re-entrance to the gang defied the national identification he learned at home from the mother. However, from this point forward, this conflict of national identification resolution is symbolically presented through a character named Trina, a girl he met after he left Long Island and who was waiting for him while he was in the Maritime Union.

Born in Puerto Rico, Trina figuratively replaces the link Piri had with Puerto Rico through his mother. Piri meets her through a friend and he felt immediately, and uncontrollably, drawn to her. When they meet, Trina explains that her name is Trinidad and that she is from Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, to which Piri responds that he is from “Harlem, *Barrio*” (108). This clarification places their origins in spaces that, even when linked through nationality, are clearly separated by difference. For Piri, his acknowledgement of Harlem as *his place* comes from the acceptance and the “feeling of belonging” (106) he had acquired by as part of the street and the gang-family subculture. On the other hand, Trina belongs to the realm of the homeland myths she shares with Piri’s mother: the fantasy of the ancestral land. It is during this time when Piri points out that, even as he had found his niche within the gang-family, he still feels that he lives in three different worlds: “the world of home, the world of the school ... and the world of the

street” (106-07). As I see it, the difference between these three worlds lies in the fact that each of them represents one of his different identity conflicts. The world of home is that portion of himself that is restrained by the rules provided by the heritage education, which, even when he left home, are still present in the form of national identity conflicts. The world of the school, based on his experience while in school in Long Island, represents that social element that provides the racial (and racist) guidelines that constrain his individuality. The world of the street, Harlem, becomes the site where an equilibrium between these different worlds is found (the in-between space). It is in this moment of split identity when Trina enters the narration. Not coincidentally, Trina (or Trinidad: Trinity in English) becomes a manifestation of Piri's link with his national past and also the figure through which the conflicts of these three worlds are confined.. If Piri's friend Brew, who accompanied him to the South, supported his quest for a racial identity, Trina becomes a similarly supportive figure for Piri's quest for national identification. As a romantic interest, she symbolically becomes the link that, if physically possessed, could harmonize all those conflicts contained in one body: nationality, race, and place in the diaspora. This is exemplified when he says that he calls her “my ‘Marine Tiger’ after the ship that brought so many Puerto Ricans to New York” (109). This signification of Trina as a ship evokes the rites of the middle passage that Paul Gilroy described in *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy sees the voyage and passage as a transition of expurgated histories, where the ocean becomes a liminal space of transnational cultural construction in which hybridity is privileged.¹¹ Trina, as “Marine Tiger,” embodies both Puerto Rico and the middle ground for Piri, a representation of hybridity as it affects identity and culture.

After his return from the South, Piri tries to reconnect with Trina but she leaves for Puerto Rico. At this point, as mentioned, he had already formulated a racial identity for himself and identifies himself as a *moyeto*, but losing Trina made him feel “a little bit more lost” (223).

This is because of Trina represents the element that could harmonize his remaining conflict: his Puerto Rican identity. This is manifested when Piri comes out of prison years later, and in an effort to consummate their relationship for the first time, Piri imagines them becoming intimate, hoping that they would be “like one Puerto Rican instead of two” (324). The importance of Trina as a facilitator of national identification lies in this possession of her body, which ultimately will define his Puerto Ricanness. Even after years of not seeing each other, possessing Trina’s body is futile. The unattainable nature of Trina’s body speaks of the impossibility of an *essential* Puerto Rican identity that Piri desired, leaving this identity at an open space that he needs to accept.

In this sense, Puerto Rico as a geographical site continues to be a place from which Piri is uprooted. The country is similarly dismissed in the sense that Piri does not need to look in it in order to find the pieces that would inform and aid his racial and national identity conflicts. These were resolved on their own as he moved between spaces and performances, as a result of diasporic positioning. The flexible character Thomas assigned to identities speak of their own malleability, in which, in each one’s intimacy can be shaped and molded. In Thomas’ case we see how gender (masculinity), race, ethnicity, and nationality have different values that depend on context, whose validity is justified and recognized as formed by different sources.

After the trip from the South, Piri’s internal conflicts with race, ethnicity, nationality, and masculinity are considerably diminished and almost silenced from the narration. The narrative focuses, by contrast, on his drug problems and the events that lead him to prison. In prison, his issues with identity are suspiciously muted or completely disappear. Prison becomes a purgatorial experience (Lane 821) but also a space of purification in which all the identity struggles are harmonized through obliteration. The subject of race, nonetheless, is tangentially addressed during Piri’s experimentation with Islam while in prison. I use the term *tangentially* because, by placing race and racism within the context of Islam in the mid 1950s, the subject is

somewhat radicalized. Therefore, race becomes more a matter of social conflict than individual. However, the sidelining of the personal identity conflicts informs that his racial and national concerns are not a predicament for him anymore.

The last section of Thomas' memoir describes his life immediately after prison and how he struggled to stay away from drugs and violence. Piri returns to Harlem and to El Barrio that he now explicitly calls "home" (318). In this section's title, "New York Town," we see that Thomas continues to spatialize the city, but this time, in contrast, the urban outline is not compartmentalized into neighborhoods. The noun *town* suggests the New York urban landscape as smaller than it is—giving it a sense of home in which all ethnicities and races are bound by the space they share. It is also an area whose boundaries are fixed: as if New York became an integrative space, a human commonplace that calls for alliances and acceptance. Divisions, nonetheless, are still present but Thomas acknowledges that it is he who has changed: "I breathed in the air; it was the same air that I had breathed as a kid. The garbage-filled backyards were the same. Man, everything was the same; only I had changed" (322). With this statement Thomas has inserted himself in the city's landscape, and has appropriated and introduced his newly accepted Puerto Rican and racial identity in the city's political structure. In doing so, Piri has turned, as de Certeau would call it, the hero of modernity because he has become part of the city by interfering, appropriating, and transforming it (95). If at the beginning of his memoir Piri had escaped from home, but not from Harlem; now he does not respect these boundaries nor does he need these limitations. Aware of the limits the urban and social politics had placed on him, Thomas decides to break with them and end his journey and the memoir the same way he started it, by walking the city. Of this he says "I felt like walking, and my walking got me to stop outside my old building at number 109" (327)—ending the story where he started it, on the

rooftop. Coming full circle, Piri has completed a cycle of identity transition, a complete change and reform.

The importance of Thomas in this dissertation is his representation of the complexities of identity formation in a diasporic setting for second-generation migrants. Contrary to Esmeralda Santiago's text discussed in the previous chapter, in Thomas we encounter an individual whose gender, racial, ethnic, and national identities gradually split. This leads to a confrontation with essentialist notions that will haunt him throughout his life. As he moves forward in his search to define and understand these identity imbrications he comes to terms with them accepting their hybrid configurations. The many different forms of disidentification with the ancestral land here presented discloses how these processes lead to inquiries in which the subject feels moved to embrace, like Piri, the world outside of home and search for answers even outside of the diaspora. This movement supposes a detachment from home and what it represents in its role of carrier of heritage education. Through his story, Thomas shows us that these processes of homeland detachment were part of a diaspora even in its beginnings and, as we will see in the next chapter, they continue until today.

NOTES

NOTES

¹ Another point of interest of the book is that the memoir is considered to exceed literary classification because the author's ethnicity and nationality allows the book to fit within the fields of U.S. Latino literature, Hispanic Literature, and Puerto Rican literature written in English.

² In order to facilitate the analysis throughout this chapter I make the distinction between Thomas (the author) and Piri (the author as a child/protagonist). Even when *Down These Mean Streets* is considered a memoir, I agree with Alfredo J. Sosa-Velasco who considers the book a "novelized autobiography" (287) since Thomas himself has acknowledged the liberties he took to merge events and the personalities of real life people in order to create fictive characters that facilitate his narrative (Von Huene Greenberg 83, 86).

³ This "time" refers to the years preceding the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the 1960s—which allows the memoir (first published in 1967) to fit within the canon of literatures surfacing during this period such as the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968). Thomas' memoir can be placed in the category of radicalized African-American works, making it, for some critics, a hybrid text (Sosa-Velasco 287-88).

⁴ An interesting aspect presented in the memoir is that even when Thomas' father is describes himself as Cuban—as he acknowledges in an interview with Lisa D. McGill (182)—Piri refers to him as Puerto Rican. This is evident when he compares it to himself: "*Funny, I thought, Poppa's the same like me, a stone Puerto Rican, and nobody in this block even pays him a mind*" (28). For the purpose of this analysis I will refer to his father as Puerto Rican because it is the description given to him in the narrative.

⁵ Memoirs seem to be one of the preferred mediums to talk about upbringing in a diaspora in particular and the migrant experience in general for many writers. For Thomas, the memoir seems to have become a privileged literary genre in order to express his ideas, as other of his books such as *Savior, Savior, Hold my Hand* (1972) and *Seven Long Times* (1974) were also memoirs. Because memoirs, as a literary form, facilitate personal expression and intimacy, I see Thomas' representation of the nascent Puerto Rican diaspora as one that has fewer filters than a fictional work, thus allowing for a more clear, and, hopefully, less manipulated version of the community around him.

⁶ Between 1900-1944, 71,000 Puerto Ricans moved to the United States (Duany 49). At this time, it was a well-established community that was beginning to appropriate its own space within the city while it still struggled to be recognized and understood by the ethno-racial system of the United States. The community was mostly settled in the eastern side of Upper Manhattan, and its presence was so strong that the area, formerly known as Italian Harlem, came to be known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio around this time. However, even when Puerto Rico's population was dividing itself, the Puerto Rican diaspora, in formation abroad, maintained clear

ties with the island at this time, and remained actively involved in the country's political affairs, specifically movements in support of the independence of Puerto Rico.

⁷ *El Barrio*, which is specifically the area that Piri refers to as Harlem Park Avenue, has been historically separated for migrant populations in New York City. Before the Puerto Rican members of the migratory waves of the 1930s and 1940s, the area was also home of the Italian and Irish diaspora groups.

⁸ This radio program, based on the adventures of a high school athlete named Jack Armstrong, was popular from 1933 to 1951. On the show, Armstrong and two of his friends will follow his friend's uncle to exotic locations around the world.

⁹ When the family moved to Long Island, Piri's mother liked that they were moving out of the city. She believed that living in the country would bring them better opportunities, and as such she adds: "It is a better life in the country. No like Puerto Rico, but it have trees and grass and nice schools" (82). After Piri's experience with racism, he tells hers: "This Long Island ain't nuttin' like your Harlem, and with all your green trees it ain't nuttin' like your Puerto Rico" (91). Aside from cataloguing Puerto Rico as a reference to the mother's relationship with the United States, this quote also highlights what/where Piri's reference is, which further emphasizes the difference between the two.

¹⁰ See Marta Sánchez's "La Malinche at the Intersection: Race and Gender in Down These Mean Streets" for a reading of the concept of *mestizaje*, as used in the memoir, contextualized to Latin American native peoples.

¹¹ In 2009 Ramón E. Soto-Crespo adopted this same idea of the crossing from Puerto Rico to the United States adapting Gilroy's title for his book *Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico*. In here, he offers an analysis of Puerto Rican migration in the 1940s and 1950s and suggests Puerto Rican identity as one that is outside of the traditional concepts of nation-state and colonialism.

CHAPTER THREE

(Re)Assembling Home in the Diaspora: Gendered Returns, Religion, and Patriarchy in

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

In “Home as a Region” Theano S. Terkenli explores the way in which a *place* becomes *home*, distinguishing it from other types of regions. The author cogently poses that the relationship between *home* and *self* is initiated when “[p]eople construct their geographies of home at the interface between their self and their world.” At this interface, he continues, “the idea of home takes shape, and the dichotomy between us and them, fundamental to shaping personal place in the world, arises” (325-26). For a first-generation migrant whose “home” is located in a distant location, this relationship between the “self and the world” is far more convoluted as compared to non-migrants. This is because of the subject’s geographical location and the sensitive value he/she places for the country of origin. Their sense of home, in this case, is distributed between their dwelling in the diaspora and the location of their national alliances. Similarly, for a second-generation migrant their “personal place in the world” (home), as Terkenli calls it, is anchored between the dichotomy of “us” and “them.” In this dichotomy the notions of the ancestral land learned through heritage education (us), continuously clashes with the social, political, and cultural order of the hostland (them).

In the previous two chapters we saw how representations of first and second-generation migrants grappled with these clashes and how these clashes affected their acculturation processes and relationships with and within their homes. In both Santiago and Thomas (first and second-generation migrants respectively) we noticed how their contact with the United States altered the concept of home by layering it with multiple nuances that resulted in an exit from the domestic sphere. This egress from home is a figurative exit from discourses of the homeland, a

disidentification act that speaks of diasporic identity development. By reading Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999) we can analyze the role *home* plays in the development of migrant subjectivities from another perspective¹ in contrast to writers like Santiago and Thomas. If Santiago and Thomas composed narratives that showcased a move away from home, in Pérez we confront a family whose lives revolve around it—a home that is static (because the family does not move) and most of its members have not left (metaphorically and figuratively). This absence of mobility is due, in part, to the family's religious beliefs, which result in a social seclusion that limits the family's contact with the wider migrant communities. In consequence, *home* becomes the epicenter of which discourses of homeland and diaspora collide as different family member's experiences and stances with both sites are presented. My analysis in this chapter focuses on the representation of these stances towards *home*—both the dwelling and nation-as-home—with special attention to how these points of view are arranged around the family structure, as well as how they represent instances in which disidentification is presented.

Geographies of Home tells the story of a Dominican family within two weeks of Iliana's, the main protagonist, return home. Iliana, a college student and a first-generation Dominican woman, decides to go back to Brooklyn to find her religious family falling apart: of her 13 siblings, her sister Marina is careening towards mental collapse; her sister Rebecca is living in a decrepit apartment with three children and an abusive husband; her brother Tico does not leave his room; and a third sister has voluntarily disappeared. Throughout remembrances scattered in the novel we are given clues of the complicated family history and family members' stories: their individual conflicts in both present and past in the Dominican Republic and the United States, their personal antagonisms, their perceptions of both home and homeland as they are marked by emotional scars related to migration. The novel explores commonplace topics in ethnic migrant literature such as ethnicity and cultural identity, and presents conventional tropes characteristic

of narratives of migration, which aid us in understanding the complexities of adaptation.

As part of the body of works written by Dominican writers in the United States, Pérez's novel has gathered less critical attention than her contemporaries despite its coverage of similar migrant topics and experiences. Recent scholarship about the novel concentrate on the relationship between migrant memory and identity, (Sandín; Suárez); gender and sexuality in migrant settings, (Chancy; Richardson); female resistance, (Palmer); the role of patriarchy (Kevane, Ochoa); and the connection between race, violence, and madness (Alcaide).² Other critics, such as Danny Méndez and Susan M. Méndez, explore how the patriarchal structure of the Dominican Republic is transplanted to New York City, and the relationship between Afro-Spiritual Practices, race, gender, and violence, respectively. My analysis will focus on the relationship between issues of race and gender as formed and affected by the patriarchal structure of the home and how they relate to Protestant and Afro-Dominican religious practices. I argue that by exploring the connections between these scattered elements of migrant identity—as they meet and conflate in the domestic sphere—we get a glimpse of the intimate connection between migrant subject and home. I believe this exercise will allow us to see how diasporic identities are informed and how the home and homeland are defined in the subject's sensibility frameworks.

In a roundtable discussion conducted by Ginetta E. B. Candelario, Pérez speaks of the challenges of defining home, identity and nationality as a migrant. The author discusses: "Identity, nationality, and 'home' . . . remain paradoxical, and it is up to each of us to define for ourselves what those terms mean. I don't even tie the concept of home to a specific land mass. For me, 'home' is an abstract, psychic space with which I render as 'home' any place I choose to inhabit" (Candelario 75). This "any place" connotation she attaches to the concept of home is an intangible and detached definition that shifts in meaning as the migrant subject moves in the search for a neutral space. As we will see, Pérez transfers this "psychic" interpretation of home

to her novel, but complicates its representation by presenting contrasting views of what *home* represents through her multiple characters. If the concept of home in national discourses aims to denote positive emotions of unity and collective intimacy, in *Geographies of Home* this space becomes a site of conflict that threatens the stability of the household and its inhabitants, presenting vexed views on insular values as they are confronted with other notions in the diaspora. In this chapter, I will argue that walking in the home geographies constructed by Pérez supposes a reorganization of the *home* concept, one that questions traditional discourses of hegemony.

By placing Iliana's character in a situation in which she is literally returning home, Pérez subtly indicates how this movement has allowed her the possibility of acquiring new experiences and self-knowledge *outside* of home. As a result, she stands out from other members of her family because "her perception of what the world could offer had expanded" (43). In opposition, other members of her family have not been "outside," and have kept themselves rotating throughout their lives around the axis of the domestic environment. I find this aspect of the epistemology of the return-to-home particularly poignant because it places the perceptions of diaspora and homeland discourses side-by-side. This side-by-side perspective, I argue, facilitates an examination of disidentificatory features. Similar to other narratives of migration that link space to identity, Pérez creates contrasts between the Dominican Republic and Brooklyn, in order to establish them as separate entities that do not necessarily communicate with each other even when they are geographically and spiritually interconnected. In my reading of the novel I see the spatial divisions Pérez makes as an invitation to question what home is and what it represents in order to inquire if migrants really have a place in the diaspora or if their place (whatever place they have identified as home) is just a homely construction—a spiritual or psychological appreciation to symbolic attachments that represents family, common history, and

nation. These questions are related to Pérez's experience when she returned to the Dominican Republic at the age of nineteen. At that moment the author believed that the country would be the place where she would finally feel at home (by nature of her heritage), yet she was bewildered by how unwelcomed she felt (Candelario 89). As such, Iliana's return to her home in Brooklyn is, on a micro level, a representation of Pérez experiences. Similar to Pérez's encounter with the Dominican Republic, Iliana's home, is (physically and psychologically) spatially divided, creating different *geographies*—as the title of the novel suggests—that segregate their members. D. Méndez draws attention to the pluralization of the title, indicating that it turns “geography” into an affective category that refers to a site where women have been enclosed throughout the history of patriarchy (166). Seeing the affective links to home as gendered constructions like D. Méndez suggests, I read the geographies of Pérez's home as junctures that are created based on the female characters' points of view towards the patriarchal structure. The way I see it, the pluralization of “*geographies*” implies multiple centers that rotate along the process of *making a home* for these female characters.

Focusing on the character's of Iliana, her mother Aurelia, and her sister Marina, my analysis will discuss different family dynamics in order to determine how *home* is assembled for these migrant subjects. It is my interest to explore how the contact (or lack thereof) with the social, cultural, and political conditions of the United States, as well as with the Dominican Republic (through the heritage education received at home) inform or misinform diasporic subjectivities. As we will see, these three characters develop similar positions towards *home*, but with different results.

The first part of my analysis will describe the structure of Iliana's home in order to ascertain its member's relationship with themselves and the rest of society. I will also dedicate a part of my discussion to comparing the members of Iliana family's positions towards New York

and Dominican Republic. Unlike the narratives discussed in the previous two chapters, Pérez's portrait of this family gives us a window to see the different perspectives these migrants have towards homeland and hostland. Iliana's family is composed of 19 members, which allows us to have a better view of the generational differences that develop between first-generation migrants along with their U.S.-raised, and American-born children and grandchildren. I argue that the family's migrant status and religious upbringing have created a double isolation (from the American society and from the "secular" Dominican diasporic community) that influences their perspectives about these two sites.

The second part of my analysis focuses on the way the family's religious upbringing serves as a setting for the reproduction of discourses transplanted from the Dominican Republic. As part of the family's heritage education, the Protestant religion enforced by Iliana's father shapes the family makeup creating a patriarchal structure that informs the female characters' gender perceptions and influences, at different degrees, their levels of agency and individualism. As a response to these gendered and religious structures, Pérez presents alternative forms of spiritualism whose purpose is to confront and dismantle these power dynamics. As I see it, this uncovers varying forms of both identification and disidentification with homeland ideologies through spiritual practices.

In the final part of my analysis I return to the exploration of the process of (re) assembling home in the diaspora contextualized by Iliana's return. I discuss the meaning behind the spatialization of the home environment as a tool to create different perspectives of home and homeland that result in *home* meanings. As we will see, the experiences Iliana has after her return reconfigures *home*—as a structure for which individuals are drawn to because of diverse emotional associations and weights—and turn it into a vexed concept. I argue that Pérez redefines the traditional concepts of home in the diaspora as a site of heritage education and

homeland attachments by presenting home(land) identification as not confined to the traditional tenets of *home*.

As indicated in the first chapter, many Cultural Studies critics understand the concept of home in the diaspora as representative of the homeland. Critics who have analyzed *Geographies of Home* align with this idea of home as a symbolic representation of Dominican Republic, as well as a site in which different effects of migration converge (Lam; D. Méndez; Suárez). The different effects of migration are present in Pérez's novel through a variety of angles, as the author herself has stated that she writes, "from multiple, contradictory perspectives and in no way set out to define what a specific reality might be" (Candelario 77). She achieves this in the novel through the display of multiple characters whose certainties about home vary and, by extension, their perspectives towards the national home diverges as well.

In order to understand the origin of these differences, we need to first contextualize how Pérez's *home* is located within the migrant maps of New York City, as well as their positions towards their homeland. According to Luis E. Guarnizo in "Los Dominicanyorks: The Making of a Binational Society" (1994), Dominicans residing in the New York in the 1990s—the time when novel is set—were caught between a binational labor market that was anchored by conjoined labor demands from both the Dominican Republic and the United States. Guarnizo states that this binational market resulted in a social group whose political interests fragmented between two national states, thus promoting a double loyalty that translated into a binational identity. However, in Pérez's representation of a Dominican home this double loyalty is not present and we encounter characters from different migrant generations who view the Dominican Republic and the United States as two separate entities that do not necessarily communicate with each other. This lack of communication will inform us of the characters' different attachments to

both sites.

One aspect that does show in Pérez's novel, however, relates to another ethnographical study of Dominicans in the United States. In "Features of the Hispanic Underclass: Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York City," Luis M. Falcón and Douglas T. Gurak examine the extent to which Dominicans in New York exhibited underclass characteristics at the beginning of the 1990s. The authors argued that Hispanics (Dominicans and Puerto Ricans) could be viewed in ways similar to African-Americans in regards to the origins of poverty; because of shifts in the labor market that resulted in geographical dislocations and turned into social isolations within the city. I propose that in *Geographies of Home* Iliana's family communal experience in the diaspora is clearly marked by the social isolation that Falcón and Gurak state stems from the poverty of underclass subjects. Of this division between the privacy of home and the public social space caused by isolation, C. Christina Lam argues that "one of Pérez's most effective narrative strategies is how she blurs the boundaries between home and street to show the relationship between the world inside and that outside the home" (40). However, I contend that even when there is a boundary between the world inside and outside of the home, this line is not "blurred" as a clear boundary between interior and exterior exists. If we compare it to Piri Thomas—where we are presented with a subject who develops his understandings of the migrant status by experiencing it through the act of walking the city—Pérez's representation of mobility in the diaspora (or even in the conglomerate that forms different ethnic communities) is absent. Instead, the author gives prevalence to the experience of *being at home* and we encounter an enclosed narrative that presents the intricacies of home—belonging to it, moving away from it, and returning to it.

Being at home for Iliana's family means circumscribing to the tenets of the Seventh-Day Adventist Protestant religion the family practices that, like any other religious doctrine, makes a

separation between the “spiritual” and the “secular.” In its role as a symbol of group identity and tribal exclusivities, religion creates another layer of alienation from society for Iliana’s family (the first one is their status as ethnic migrant subjects). According to Roger L. Dudley, Edwin I. Hernández, and Sara M. K. Terian in “Religiosity and Public Issues Among Seventh-Day Adventists,” creating a social distance constitutes part of the Adventist practices as represented in their lack of public participation (344). Confined by the dictums of the Seventh-Day Adventist religion, Iliana’s family manifests this lack of public participation, as evidenced by the lack of contact with the Dominican or other migrant communities outside of the home. The nature of this sectarian isolation represented in the detachment from the larger migrant Dominican community represents unawareness of the social and cultural diasporic maps in which we can place the family. This isolation discloses the family’s constrained knowledge of migration as a communal experience. This is made evident through the limited representation of identification with the ethnic, racial, and gender conflicts in the wider diasporic context. Because migration cannot be separated from dislocation, this isolation is better understood if we approach it in terms of the “movements” Pérez’s characters make outside of the house. The movements presented in the novel are mostly circumscribed to a limited number of places—their church, and Iliana’s sister’s (Rebecca) apartment—which are sites that are also bounded by the same religious ideologies they practice at home. Other movements in which the characters participate are restricted to a limited set of spaces that are comprised of certain streets and avenues, but are sites that do not encompass a sizable portion of the neighborhood. The lack of movement, however, does not result in an unawareness of the external sites of the diaspora because these places are acknowledged by the sporadic contrasts made between the Dominican Republic and Brooklyn. These comparisons, however, establish these places as separate spaces that do not communicate, or become involved with, the environment created at home even when they may be politically

interconnected.

As a representation of the Dominican diaspora, this family is presented as if they have taken what de Certeau calls “pedestrian practices” and have turned them inward, in order to stamp their “narrative” in the city of their diasporic experience at home: the place they have delimited for themselves in the city. De Certeau theorizes that the city functions as a place of appropriations and transformations as a result of interferences made through the act of walking which produces an enunciation (or narrative) of the urban landscape (97). Since Pérez’s characters lack movement, one could assume that the acculturation and assimilation processes that take place through the contact between a migrant subject and its city is extremely limited. However, regardless of this distance between them and the city, processes of disidentification continue to take place at different degrees for different family members because the private vs. public spheres dichotomies are reproduced inside the home as a way of creating geographies of self and other. Beyond the role religion plays in the construction of a spiritual subjectivity and isolation, *home* is more than the place “inside,” and it carries within it emotional connotations which situate it as a place of importance in the characters’ value frameworks. If we consider, as de Certeau states, that the act of walking the city is to lack a place (103), Pérez’s characters believe that *home* is the place where they belong, hence devaluing the need for walking.

It is this need for belonging that ties all of Pérez’s characters to their home. After two weeks with her family, at the end of the novel, Iliana realizes that “she had returned not so much to help as to be embraced” (312). The meaning Pérez places for home lies in this return. By being in college and by acquiring a different knowledge of the “outside” that her family does not have, Iliana is placed outside of the narrative of the home due to this educated and “secular” awareness. Similarly, even when it is because of her declining mental state, her sister Marina is also placed outside of the narrative of the home—as a way of being outside of reality—which

gives her the “permission” to criticize what she considers to be wrong with the household structure. Through the characters of Iliana and Marina, along with their mother Aurelia, Pérez confronts the discourses of a space that is individual and personal. Furthermore, these characters raise questions regarding the values of the Dominican Republic’s heritage education the migrant children received at home. Because the domestic space is where outside signifiers are filtered through the father’s religious vision of the world, the act of being “outside” and inside, is what prompts the conflicts that arise in Iliana, Marina, and her mother Aurelia, as they strive to make sense of “home” as a place of belonging.

As much as Pérez characters strive to belong, for most of Aurelia’s children home is a place that creates hurts and emotional unrest. Some of the children may want to escape the religious oppression of the home, yet Aurelia would like to create a welcoming environment for all. The novel describes how some of the children have already left the family in order to create a life for themselves. The older sons Mauricio and Chaco live in the Dominican Republic, Emanuel lives in Seattle, and the youngest, Tico, plans to leave home right after he graduates high school (174). Perhaps the most puzzling case of abandoning the home is Iliana’s sister, Beatriz, who left home and no one has ever heard from her since (42). Of these children, Iliana is the only one whose return demonstrates a second opportunity for home to make sense as a place of belonging. The process of making sense of home for Iliana is an act of conciliation of the social/secular knowledge she has experienced outside and apart from their Christian upbringing. Such an act comes with strong emotional repercussions that will result with transforming her perceptions towards home.

As the site of heritage education, home is also a place where the nation is represented, and it is as well where the character’s stances towards home become sensitive stances towards the nation. In the novel, Pérez refers to a total of 19 characters who are part of the family nucleus

and through them we see, at varying degrees, their responses towards what the Dominican Republic and New York City represent. This allows us to draw a map of generational positions towards homeland and host society. These migrant generations can be divided in two groups: those who were born in the Dominican Republic, and those who were born in the United States. Of the two, the first group can also be separated into two units: those migrants born in the Dominican Republic who migrated as adults, and those who migrated as children. Early on in the story, the narrator summarizes their positions towards the two places:

So often Aurelia and Papito had considered returning to the Dominican Republic but had remained in the United States to be near their married children and because their youngest, remembering little of their birthland, considered it a backward, poverty-ridden place. Now she wondered if by emigrating they had unwittingly caused their children to yearn for a wealth generally portrayed as easily accessible to anyone in the States. (21-22)

This description condenses how the processes of assimilation and acculturation are diverse for different family members and how they are influenced by the idea of the consecration of the ethos of the American Dream. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the attainability of this “dream” is one of the motives that generate difference between homeland and diaspora and, as such, is one of the vehicles that drives disidentification.

Aurelia, Papito and their daughters Rebecca and Zoraida are the characters presented as the first-generation of migrants in the novel. For them “[o]ne of the few advantages of emigrating was escaping riots and military raids, but even this was often overshadowed by a fear of deportation” (59) during the Trujillo regime. The members of this generation either do not speak any English or do not speak the language very well and there are, for some of them, a desire to go back to Dominican Republic. Even as Papito wants to go back and Aurelia would personally like to return but does not want to because of her children, Rebecca and Zoraida do not show any interest in returning to the country. However, these four characters are represented

as disillusioned with the idea of the American dream, and recognize the fallacy behind this discourse. One aspect of this generation is that they do not say much about the Dominican Republic, turning the country into an enigma for younger generations. The level of their occlusion is such that the narrator indicates that in the house there is only one picture of the family in the Dominican Republic (40). As such, they avoid conversations of the past or distort events in order to hide the truth. For example, the past is enhanced in an episode when Papito is telling a story of his childhood in the Dominican Republic and his wife Aurelia unmasks the lie immediately. “Not lies. Just the embellished truth,” is Papito’s response; but for him this “truth” is so real that he believes it and cries at the memory he creates for himself (50). The fact that this generation tries to occlude aspects of the past through silence or fiction results in a problem for the heritage education their children receive at home because the past, as one of the bases for identification with the homeland, is denied or distorted. It can only be assumed that, for the members of this generation, the past during the Trujillato is too hurtful to remember. However, this fictionalization is a form of disidentification with the homeland that hurts identification for younger generations. A migrant subject’s upbringing characterized by embellished histories and stories of the past result in the formation of idealized images of the nation which, I argue, produces an alternate reality that speak of distance.

In the novel, the first generation is also a group composed of family members who were born in the Dominican Republic, but migrated to the United States as children. Now adults in the novel, these children are Marina, Beatriz, Iliana, and Tico. These characters believe in the opportunities that living in the United States could bring to their lives and live hopeful that some day they will be able to reach the “American Dream”. They do not share the idea of return to the Dominican Republic that some members who came as adults have developed because they see the Dominican Republic as a “backward place, poverty-ridden” (22). These characters seem to

hold on to the ideal of improvement through social mobility in the United States. At the same time, the vision of the Dominican Republic for the first-generation children is further influenced by the romanticized version their parents have created for them. For example, the narrator indicates that Iliana is sometimes transported “to a Dominican Republic where summer days were eternal, clouds evaporated in the scorching heat, and palm trees arched along beaches of fiery sand” (4). In this case, the usage of the article “a” in “a Dominican Republic,” the narrator discloses the awareness of multiple homeland perspectives that opposes the “backward place, poverty-ridden” (22) country. This shows the conflictive nature of what homeland represents, showing that the Dominican Republic can be different things as its appearance and representation in consciousness is driven by whatever personal need prompts their longing. This idea of an identification with the homeland, however idealized it may be, is in contrast with the silences and occlusion of their parents.

The second generation is composed of the children of migrants born in the United States, and are represented through Rebecca’s 3 children: Esperanza, Rubén, and Soledad. These members, who have inherited their migrant status, have an even more filtered version of their national past and heritage. As such, their development of a diasporic subjectivity is informed by a different set of migrant experiences. This subjectivity is aided by their knowledge of English even when they are ethnically and racially marked. These children have a vision of the Dominican Republic that is more vague than other members of the family and an even greater distance from it. When Aurelia is telling a story about the country, Esperanza asks, “[t]hat’s were Mami and you were born, right?” (226?). By asking this question she is making a separation between their ethnic origin and their present position in the diaspora. In this case the Dominican Republic is, as we have seen in *Down These Mean Streets*, the *mother’s land*, and the country has no sensitive meaning other than existing outside-of-their-reality: a site to which they do not

identify. This perception of the country is greatly informed by the heritage education they receive from their mother Rebecca, who, in turn, reproduces the same silences and fictionalization of the past characteristic of the first-generation adult migrants. The lack of identification of her children with their heritage land, however, presents a negative undertone when Rebecca tells them that the reason she left the country was because people there were superstitious. When her son Rubén cannot say the word “superstitious,” he proceeds to replace it with the word “stupid” (226), thus presenting serious negative connotations in the interpretation of the Dominican Republic and its people. This negative perception works in opposition to the ambivalent image developed by the first-generation of migrants, as well as the ones who migrated as children. Furthermore, this presents a national identity gap between generations because these children do not identify their ancestral land as homeland.

The importance Pérez’s novel in this dissertation lies in the fact that it is the only narrative (of the four analyzed) that presents a clear mock-up of the generational perspectives towards both homeland and diaspora. Different generations have different positions towards the Dominican Republic, showing different degrees of separation. These levels of disidentification show the diverse levels of disentanglement with the homeland and the way disidentification develops at different frequencies in the stages of assimilation and acculturation processes. The title of the novel could refer to these differing perspectives between generations if we consider *geographies* as the way through which each character is able to interpret the landscapes of *home*. These landscapes depend on the perspective of the observer, which is informed by political, social, and identity codes, and also by how they are affected by them.

Beginning with these divergent perspectives, the generational differences between Iliana’s family members are bound to produce conflicts in the novel. If we consider that they are filtered through the lens of the significant role that religion plays in influencing the ethnics by

which the family operates in their every-day lives, then these conflicts are made even more evident and important. The spiritual practice, in itself, becomes the *patois* in which this family communicates because its members are expected to submit to the laws and regulations that the faith imposes. This is particularly true for Aurelia who, as a woman and Papito's wife, is expected to follow them—these aspects of identity play pivotal roles in defining her stances towards her heritage land.

The family's allegiance to the Seventh-Day Adventist religion comes by way of the Dominican Republic through Papito who converted to the religion in his home country. As the head of the household, Papito transmitted his faith to his wife Aurelia as well as to their children. Once the family migrated to the United States, Aurelia's goal was to create the ideal home based on emotional, material, and physical well being (not necessarily contextualized through religion) in order to give her children a better life. Papito relied solely on his religion's precepts to guide the family with the support of his wife. In this sense, the heritage education the children received from both parents is far more convoluted than the representations of heritage education presented in Santiago and Thomas. In Pérez's narrative the knowledge of the homeland does not revolve around culture alone (secular traditions and practices); instead it is tinged by the subculture of religious dogmas that assign different meanings to "secular" practices. Papito's child-rearing practices create a particular domestic fabric that is framed around an idealized performance of the faith in which he serves as the primary patriarchal authority figure. Some critics have viewed this religious structure and Papito's authoritarian role as stemming from (and a representation of) the Trujillo regime (D. Méndez 170; Suárez 158) because of the physical and emotional violence it incorporates. For D. Méndez, this analogy is based upon the fact that, for Papito, "order is organized fear" (172), that he implements forcefully as a strategy to control his children (318). I argue that this strategy also relies on the absence and negation of all other competing modes of

social life that religion imposes upon the family, transforming the domestic sphere into a place controlled by a regime that regulates all internal interactions. If we understand religion as a male-centered undertaking, then we can foresee the implementation of gender codings that will affect the female members of the family. D. Méndez connects these gendered articulations of religion and claims that Papito brings home “the attributes of the Trujillato male” because he reproduces the *macho* ideology of the regime through his religion (170-71). As a result, the women's place in the family is consigned to the traditional roles defined by the responsibilities of homemaking, subjugation, and submissiveness as a consequence of either the gender codings imposed by religion or the macho ideology from the Trujillato. These female-defined roles are constantly reinforced by the male members of the family and are, sometimes, even strengthened and supported by the female members. The fact that these gender codes are also reproduced by women in the novel address the strong role these transmitted ideologies play in female character's psyche. Lam sees these gender dynamics as a form of “domestic captivity” in which women and children are confined by economic, social, psychological and legal subordination (40). In this context, we could talk about the female characters in the novel as trapped in a triple isolation and subordination: captive by the politics of the host society due to their migrant condition, their spiritual isolation due to religion, and their gender subjugation due to patriarchal ideologies.

However, Ramona Hernández and Silvio Torres-Saillant have questioned the subject of female subjugation regarding Dominican women in the diaspora. In “Dominicans in New York: Men, Women, and Prospects,” the authors warn us of the problems of essentializing Dominican women's “submissive” roles as passive recipients of the cultural myths of a traditional patriarchal Dominican society. The authors draw attention to the common interpretation of women's submissiveness that assumes that Dominican women's subordination is the result of a

lack of economic diversification, modernization, and technological progress in comparison to the United States. Hernández and Torres-Saillant direct us to the fact that multiple authors have looked critically at American society discovering that the United States “can hardly be deemed free of gender oppression and inequality” (37)³. The authors give examples in which Dominican women have shown individualism and resistance to domination through insubordination, and conclude that migration only accentuated their sense of themselves as political and social beings (37-38). The misconception of the diaspora as a full-fledged agent of contention when it comes to challenging normative notions of the homeland is brought to the forefront by the discussion presented by these critics.

Pérez presents these forms of female insubordination as instinctually innate in her characters (Aurelia in particular) in similar ways that Hernández and Torres-Saillant pose in their article. This displays that the challenge to male authority, however subtle, did not originate in the diaspora. In the novel this insubordination is presented in the partial compliance with the religious and gender constructions. I see this compliance as a façade because most of the female characters often challenge Papito’s rulings behind his regulative eye. In opposition, Rebecca’s relationship with her husband, Pasi3n, is based on physical abuse, fear, self-abandonment, and emotional dependence. The dynamics of this relationship is informed by the same set of gender roles that her mother silently breaks but Rebecca acquiesces to them. Interestingly, Aurelia and Rebecca are characters who belong to the generation of migrants who were born in the Dominican Republic and who migrated to the U.S. with this set of ideologies transplanted from the homeland. By contrast, Iliana and Marina—two characters who grew up in the United States—are more prone to disrespect Papito’s authority and rulings. From the beginning of the novel Marina is the only character who, because of her schizophrenic mental state, breaks the silence that surrounds the house more often than the other women. Through Marina, the power

structures that regulate gender roles, religion, and the migrant condition find in “mental instability” a place in which no role is assumed, no fear of eternal condemnation exists, and no particular part in social and cultural hierarchies are convoluted. In opposition, even when Iliana has gathered an outsider’s view of the world and carries new perspectives—the power-knowledge that could revolve the household structure through educated reason—she refuses a move to insubordination and favors silence in front of the father. Iliana and Marina represent opposites in the power hierarchy of the domestic space and are characters who remain consistent throughout most the novel: Iliana respects the censorship of the father and Marina voices her views.

The partial or full breakage from the authoritative structures of machismo and religion promoted by the father is one that has taken place in silence. These strategies of silence and façade at home are, as D. Méndez poses, “foundational in the crafting of female subjectivities in the Dominican Republic—the national home” (166). Linked with what Hernández and Torres-Saillant have said about Dominican woman submission, silence and façade uncover the progression of women’s agency and individualism after migration. Either through façade or blatant confrontation, the women’s hidden or open response towards *pater* law is a judicious form of transgression to the patriarchy that Papito represents. These moderate forms of transgressions are, nonetheless, modes of disidentification with homeland normative structures: ideas of disentanglement that question regularizing designs when considered that these patriarchal structures were transplanted from the Dominican Republic. In Pérez’s novel we witness how these female insubordinations increase as the story continues: If Marina is already in a place of defiance, then Aurelia and Iliana begin to question their religion and its relationship to their heritage.

If we look at how transplanted religious practices are reshape after migration, we would see interesting dynamics that speak of these transnational linkages and their role in ethnic preservation. When discussing Catholic Dominicans in Boston in “Local-level Global Religion: The Case of U. S.-Dominican Migration” author Peggy Levitt stresses how Dominicans retain homeland attachments through spirituality (74). In this ethnographic study, the author finds that even when Dominicans “continue to infuse fresh ‘Dominicanness’ into the church . . . it is a ‘Dominicanness’ that is increasingly pan-Latino” which weakens “its uniquely Dominican elements” (75). This U.S. Latino Catholicism originates from the organizational structure of the Roman Catholic Church, in which institutions re-structure themselves to serve the Latino communities and, as such, Dominicans are “expected to assimilate into this pan-Latino market niche” (Levitt 80-81). I mention Levitt’s study in order to shed light on the way organized religion can operate and influence the formation of diasporic identities. By clustering subjects under the ethnic category of “Latino,” this Catholic configuration blurs all the local specificities that distinguish ethnic groups and customize their religion to fit within an American structure. However, spiritual practices in the United States are not always confined to institutionalized religion. Even when Iliana’s family attend a Protestant church, one would have to wonder how their religion, as a vehicle for subcultural reproduction, influences their relationship with the homeland and informs their ethnicity—specifically for migrants who arrived in the United States as children or who were born there. In *Preserving Ethnicity Through Religion in America: Korean Protestants and Indian Hindus across Generations* (2010), Pyong Gap Min studies the role Protestant and Hindu religions play in preserving cultural or spiritual identity in migrant generations. Based on sociological literature, the author argues that the primary function of religion as a subculture in migrant groups is to ease the cultural connections they have with their countries of origin. However, he discovers that, for these particular migrant groups, religion

preserves ethnic identity in different ways—if for Indian Hindus religion safeguards national identity, for Koreans Protestants it damages identity preservation, particularly for members of the second generation. In *Geographies of Home* Pérez does not directly tackle the role that the family's Protestant religion has in perpetuating their national identity. Instead, on the contrary, even when in Iliana's home there is a division between this exclusive domestic belief force and external political ideologies, the author highlights that peripheral ideas sift through the religious filter and get to different family members (particularly for members of the second generation). Through this, we learn of the varying commitments and priority given to this religion in the lives of the family members. We are able to see how rooted it is in their individual social and cultural perceptions of identity as well as their identification with their home country.

The most noticeable example of these responses to Papito's religion (and its corresponding link with ethnicity) is represented by his wife Aurelia along with the way Pérez presents alternative forms of spiritualism that subvert his patriarchal and religious order. The Prologue to the novel starts with the story of Bienvenida, Aurelia's mother, who is on her deathbed in the Dominican Republic surrounded by all her children; all except Aurelia. In this moment Aurelia, then pregnant with Iliana and miles away in the province of Azua, senses her mother's death. The forewarning of the mother's death prompted Iliana's birth and with it carried on the legacy of another form of spiritual practice whose faith is informed, among many others abilities, by visions, visitations, premonitions, and voices that both Aurelia and Iliana experience throughout their lives. These forms of preternatural powers are never named in the novel. As S. Méndez notes in "Afro-Caribbean Spiritual Practices, Race, Gender, and Violence in Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*," the description of this faith's practices are comparable to African diasporan/Afro-Caribbean religions such as Voodoo and/or Santería (116). In my reading I will therefore refer to Bienvenida's spiritual practices as such. The importance of the

transference of this faith from Bienvenida to Aurelia and to Iliana by way of her birth lies in the fact that it is rooted in Afro-Dominican spiritual practices that are in opposition to Papito's faith. It is also important that Santeria, as a faith with Afro-Caribbean origins, has historically been considered a syncretic theology of liberation in response to Western religions and colonization. For example, in the case of Cuban *santeros* in the United States, Harry G. Lefever states: "Santeria can be understood as a 'textual' rewriting and rereading of the biographies, the histories, and the social contexts of its adherents" (328). Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, Santeria can be seen as part of occluded and marginalized forms of spiritualism that did not fit the Trujillato's Catholic discourse and whose legacy continues to be a textual rewriting of its history and biography. As a theology of liberation, Santeria in the Dominican Republic addresses the disidentification processes with Trujillato hegemony and offers counterhegemonic claims to its social, economic, and political order systems.

Santeria's counterhegemonic role in the novel is, however, occluded as presented through Aurelia's rejection of her mother's heritage when she adopts Papito's religion as her own in the Dominican Republic. Understanding religions as social memberships, Aurelia's rejection of this faith also represents a rejection of her Afro-Dominican roots.⁴ This religious "whitening" is a fact that Jill Toliver Richardson and Myriam J.A. Chancy have identified in their analyses as the root of the family's misfortunes as it means the rejection of blackness. Throughout his analysis, Richardson's summarizes Aurelia's rejection as a suppression of a legacy of female power that comes via the Afro-Dominican heritage and results in female submission. On the other hand, Chancy posits that "the subtext of the family's dysfunction is a discomfort with admitting its mixed racial heritage and loss of spiritual roots, a spirituality also encoded as Afro-Dominican rather than Latino/a" (65). This, accordingly, manifests in Aurelia's daughters' ethnic and racial uncertainties. These two aspects of race and gender as sources of power encoded in the Afro-

Dominican heritage is the foundation of Aurelia's developing frustration over the course of the novel. The narrator tells us that,

[m]ore and more Aurelia found herself remembering the distant past.... As she delved into the past she was conscious of something missing in the present—something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children.... and she was determined to discover what had caused the loss... (23)

This passage, as representative of the recognition of misplaced heritage sensitivity, is more clearly outlined by Pérez in Candelario's roundtable discussion. Pérez indicates that women "are the purveyors of stories, the ones who pass down histories and knowledge to their daughters," and acknowledges that by silencing her past, Aurelia fails to give her daughters the tools necessary to live life in the diaspora since they "would have fared better had they been armed with certain truths rather than shielded from them" (Candelario 70). As such, through Aurelia's inability to pass down family and heritage legacies to her offspring, we discover the origin of the tribulations these migrants suffer in the diaspora: Missing the links in the chain to your past results in a loss of agency that affects the strengthening of one's identity when one is confronted by the racial, gender, and sexuality politics of the host country.

In the novel, Aurelia's story becomes a journey of acknowledging her failed agency in the present and the claim of her heritage identity. This claim comes by way of two experiences that help Aurelia transition from submission to breaking Papito's rule through her embrace of Santería. The first step in this journey began after Marina's suicide attempt following a mental breakdown that draws attention to herself in church. After being verbally chastised by other church members in front of her family, Papito aligned with the rest of the congregation in censuring his daughter by ignoring and failing to support her. This prompts Marina to go home and attempt suicide. Afterwards when Aurelia discovers Marina's dying body at home, she confronts Papito, putting the responsibility of her daughter on him: "Her blood is on your

hands!” (124). While at the hospital with Marina, and following a remembrance of her mother’s spiritual practices, Aurelia “for the first time regretted having discarded her mother’s gifts... She regretted as well the many years she had spent running from her heritage” (135). This claim of her heritage is tightly linked to the concept of home: a home that is not tied to a physical site:

Aurelia for the first time granted herself permission to sprout roots past concrete into soil . . . 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).

Before being able to uproot herself from home, however, Aurelia needs to first accept the repercussions that denying her heritage has had on herself and her children. This acceptance comes after remembering her mother’s “gifts” which leads her to the resolution of resistance to power and transferring that legacy to her children: “Exhaling, she expelled the resentment she had harbored towards her husband. From that day on she would hold only herself accountable. She would no longer depend on anyone else to do for her or her children what she should have taken upon herself to do” (137). This intimate affirmation of agency is transformed into physical action after a second experience with her family. Not knowing how to help her daughter’s Rebecca’s tribulations with her abusive husband, and after seeing the effect this violent relationship has had in her grandchildren, Aurelia decides to conjure Pasi3n’s death through an act of Santeria (255-56). First by silencing Papito’s authority in regards to his reaction to Marina in church, and then by rejecting her husband’s religion altogether and embracing Santeria in order to attack Pasi3n, Aurelia engages in a double breakage with the dominating powers represented in Papito: both the gender and religious codes. Because both gender constructions and Christian tenets are male enterprises, Aurelia’s shift in regards to the patriarchal structure inverted the domestic male-centered narrative, thus subverting patriarchy.

Aurelia's empowerment has become a minor matter of debate in the novel's analyses that I have encountered. Lucía M. Suárez in *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (2006), for example, has argued that Aurelia's character is one that remains silent and who, as a prisoner in her own house, is a defeated woman (178). While this reading bears merit, I align with Lam and D. Méndez who see her as playing a more active role in defining prowess for herself and her daughters. According to Lam, Aurelia's "return to magic likewise signals to [Pérez] characters their need to find new means of empowerment, thereby providing readers hope and the ability to view the characters as more than just victims" (43). Correspondingly, D. Méndez indicates, "[n]ot only is she not a defeated woman; Aurelia is also not a silent figure in the household—but rather her voice is one that exists in gesture or as a psychic energy" (173). D. Méndez argues that this "psychic energy" has existed throughout Aurelia's life in the house, silently ever present in the form of insubordination. Subtly, Aurelia's decision to confront and speak of "[t]he silence enveloping these legacies, the half-truths meant to gloss over and protect, the falsehoods uttered for fear of causing pain, and the inability or unwillingness to speak" (298), places a benchmark of resistance to power for her daughters and becomes a form of testimony that proves the legacy is transferred "psychically" to them. At the end of the novel Aurelia remembers her mother telling her that she needed to remember, "[b]ecause the future will hurt you worse if you deny the past" (295). Aurelia's claim to power via her return to Santería places a cultural node that did not exist in the household and becomes her success in reclaiming and transferring the racial heritage and the female legacy of power that is embedded in the Afro-Caribbean religion she inherited from the Dominican Republic.

If Santería was a form of disidentifying with power structures in the Dominican Republic, its presence in the diaspora represents a return to cultural roots and becomes an extension of marginalized stories that find a place on the margins in the United States. Because she is the

character with the strongest national ties, Aurelia is the vehicle through which this identification with the homeland is placed. Papito, similarly, maintained these same national ties also through spirituality, but his allegiance to the Protestant religion negated the Afro-Caribbean components of his heritage. If in Aurelia's return to the past the ancestral land becomes reified through this spiritual connection that represent the histories of transgressions to power orders, for Iliana, the restoration of this past heritage means the restructuring of the home narrative as well as its preservation through inheritance and time. For example, Iliana's return home was prompted by a *voice* that told her she needed to go back. Even when she did not know about the heritage connection of this voice, it transported her to the Dominican Republic (4). In *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998), Kathleen Brogan talks about how the haunting of spiritual forces becomes a metaphor for discovering, recovering or inventing one's cultural heritage. Similarly, the spectral presence of this voice for Iliana is a clear representation of her past heritage—recurrently lingering in her life, reminding her that heritage is ever present and one cannot detach from it as much as one disidentify with it.

Because forms of disidentification take place in sites in which hybrid cultural practices are present (like diasporic sites), the religious syncretism of Afro-Dominican practices can be said to mirror the migrant's syncretic experience of cultural and social exercises that appear in adaptation and acculturation processes. However, even when we can find similarities between these two processes of syncretism, racial and ethnic components embedded in both the Afro-Dominican practices and the migrant's experience in New York are more conflictive in the novel if we take into account the racial politics Iliana's family encounters in the diaspora. As an Afro-Caribbean religion, Santeria allocates blackness and oppression in the Dominican subject's body. However, the family's unawareness of their Afro-Dominican heritage places them outside, tangentially, of this racial knowledge. In the novel, we encounter different physical descriptions

and self-racial identifications that define the racial landscape of the family and that place them at different locations within the racial spectrum in the racial geography of Iliana's family. Their self-identification with race is influenced by their personal experiences with the codes of American color lines as well as their religion. When framed under religious ideologies, their views on race are translated into silence—the only place allotted by the subjugation provided by the religiosity of the domestic site. As such, the different ways each family member interprets their blackness in the diasporic space transitions from acceptance to suppression and negation of blackness. Marina and Iliana's cases are particularly interesting because they are the only characters who talk openly about race. Upon her arrival at home, Iliana's brother Tico asked if she had yet met “a gorgeous blue-eyed hunk” in college (38). When Iliana responds that “blue-eyed” wouldn't be her first choice, Marina interjects to say that Iliana could do better. Then the following exchange between the two sisters takes place:

“Better? What the hell is that supposed to mean?” [says Iliana]
“You know how black men are.”
“No, Marina. Tell me.”
“They're lazy as shit and undependable.”
“You've been watching too much TV,” Iliana snapped.
“TV, my ass. Look at all your brothers.”
“Look at yourself. You're suffering from the same thing they are, thinking that lighter must be better.”
“Give me a break, Iliana. How many black people are at your school?”
Iliana whirled around to face her sister. “What are you saying? That blacks are inferior? Is that what you think of yourself?”
“I'm Hispanic, not black.”
“What color is your skin?”
“I'm Hispanic!” (38)

Marina is the only family member shown to voice her racism towards blacks, and the only who shown to reject her own blackness even when the narrator describes her as having a “baboon nose and nigger lips” (42). Throughout the novel it is implied that her racism is the product of rape by a black fortuneteller whose intromission in Marina's body, she believes, has

tainted her with his race. She was convinced that “something putrid had been implanted deep inside her,” but she still saw “her pale skin shades lighter than any of her sisters” (18). However, the narrator does not confirm this rape, which renders questionable if the event even took place or if it is a product of her mental state. Either way, this experience with the fortuneteller marks her perception of blackness as malevolent and violent, leading to a suppression and negation of it. By claiming a Hispanic identity, Marina places blackness in the domain of the Other (D. Méndez 177). As such, this erases any traces of her ancestry by adapting her identity to the racial and ethnic conventions of the American social structure.

For Lyn Di Iorio Sandín, Marina’s conflict symbolizes both an aspect of her unconscious as well of her extended family, which suffers from the same complexes but to a minor extend (73). However, when Iliana accuses Marina of suffering from the same thing her family suffers, she is acknowledging the legacy of racial erasure that the family’s configuration of silence has put into place and this act places her outside of her family’s views on race. This is because Iliana, I argue, has been conscious of these racial dynamics even before she went to college. As a black Dominican woman Iliana experienced the inability of identifying as neither black nor Hispanic in ways similar to Piri Thomas. While in school, “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). Her search for belonging and acceptance led her to an accommodating space, placed at the center: “With her skin color identifying her as a member of one group and her accent and immigrant status placing her in another, she had fit comfortably in neither and even less in the circles she had found herself in when she finally went to school” (191). This capacity for adaptation allowed her to accept a black-Hispanic identity that placed her in isolation from the rest of the multi-racial and multi-ethnic society of New York, as well as within her own family. S. Méndez indicates that “the claiming of a racial identity is highly problematic for Iliana” (110).

However, I argue that her racial recognition is evident from the beginning of the novel when we encounter an Iliana who is unfazed when she finds the word “NIGGER” written on her college dorm room door (1). This substantiates my claim that she has already gone through the course of easing the racial stigmas and racism of society, and has accepted her incorporation in that society as a racialized subject.

These diverse perspectives between Iliana and Marina illustrate how race lies at an intersection where many racial and ethnic interpretations collide. Even when Pérez does not provide any evidence of Marina’s position towards blackness before her rape, and neither offers Aurelia’s point of view of her as black based on the codes of American color lines, the author does supply a linkage to her black ancestry in Iliana. This explains why Iliana is the only character possessing an awareness of her racial heritage. Iliana’s recognition of the voice that told her to come back home—a “voice that reassured Iliana of her own existence and kept her rooted” (4)—becomes the preternatural element responsible for transnational linkages. If Pérez aims to articulate forms of exclusion shared historically through the presence of Afro-Dominican cultural practices, Iliana’s disavowal of her family represents an unique approach to racialized identities in racialized spaces that speak of the vexed changing ethnic and racial make ups of New York City Dominicans. As the sole sentient being in the family, Iliana becomes “bearer of the continuity of a Dominican cultural identity” (D. Méndez 169) which is telling when considering that Marina and Iliana belong to the same migrant generation yet have differing views on race. Iliana’s acknowledgement of her race and Marina’s disidentifying gesture towards blackness reveals the complexity of the processes of disidentification that exemplifies that these processes cannot always be understood as set in a particular stage of the course of assimilation as well as be applied to all members of a diasporic group, even when they belong to the same migrant generation.

Iliana's return home marks a symbolic return to the national home with the knowledge of the social and racial codes and outsider's perspectives that questions the bases in which her home was formed. This knowledge recognizes that the conflicts of violence, poverty, displacement, and adaptation brought upon the household's members are due to them being marked by migration status, gender, and race. Iliana also recognizes that these conflicts are absorbed by her parents and siblings at different rates, and processed at diverse intensities. As a result, the idea of *home*—as a repository of the past that can become functional depending on how well its inhabitants merge both past histories with the present—becomes different things for different members. So far we have seen how Aurelia began to reconceptualize home as an archive of the past, dislocating the concept of home from a physical place. For Papito, home continues to be the Dominican Republic, as he is the only one who wants to return. However, knowing now how this home is structured by religion, and how perceptions of gender and race are organized in this domestic environment, we need to analyze what home represents for Iliana and how she (re)assembles it after her return.

The space Iliana inhabited before going to college “was home: safe and familiar, despite its appearance,” and believed that upon her return “[t]here was nothing in it she should fear” (27). The return to the national home is, as D. Méndez indicates, a “symbolic representation of immigration” because it parallels the experiences of many migrants who return to the homeland only to feel that they no longer belong because they have become “too assimilated” (170). It is also “a retreat to the dream of upward social mobility” (D. Méndez 170). For example, as Iliana prepares to leave college she leaves behind items that would reveal her as “secular” or “modern” to the family—e.g. clothing items that would be considered indecent by them (8). As such, this return reveals “the doom failure of attempting to return home the same person who left it” (D. Méndez 170) because, according to the narrator in the novel, “[o]nly by leaving home had she,

on occasion, acquired the confidence to express her opinions, and she feared that by returning she would fall silent once again” (10). Shedding the knowledge she gathered outside of home in order to be able to return to it reveals the disidentification process she went through after leaving home the first time. This discloses that the codes learned at home were not functional for the outside world. I agree with D. Méndez when he states that Iliana’s fear of return stem from the politics of fear and adoration to her father. The voice that commanded her return made “it virtually impossible for her to inhabit another location without first returning home” and facing them (D. Méndez 170). However, rather than relate the voice only to the fear of what she may encounter when she returns, I see this insistence of the voice as an existential return. The voice, whether internal or spiritual, is a pragmatic response of the return to the known, an encounter with the familiar, the place where she expects to be most comfortable with her self. Her fear refers to a concern of not belonging now that she is aware that she is not the same person who left home. The impossibility of inhabiting another location refers to the unfeasibility of living in the national home, and the voice (as a spiritual link to past heritages) is a call for a return to roots: the national home calling for a revision of national identification paradigms.

At first Iliana’s return is presented through her impressions of the house’s exterior, which Iliana found different from how she left it. The house stands out from the other buildings, which are in a state of decay—“gray and stooped, like the bodies of old men” (27)—while the house’s yellow paint made it look “festive” and “deceptively new” (28). This fact is mentioned early in the story, as if the narrator wants us to be aware of the condition of the different spaces that form the configuration of the migrant neighborhood. The contrast between this house and the others however, is Aurelia and Papito’s attempt to build a homely environment, yet it is also another façade that shades the emotional conditions that take place inside. Even when the house masks its emotional decay with paint, the inside state mirrors the decay of its surrounding buildings,

and, by extension, the emotional conditions of the migrant and diasporic communities that surround it. Put another way, the interior of the house is marked by its underclass status within the rest of the city. This alerts us that, even as the family lives in isolation, they are also affected by the same social, political, and cultural circumstances that disturb the wider migrant communities.

When Iliana walks into the house we see how *home* becomes a reference for heritage and national identification sensitivities. She immediately saw the internal changes upon walking into the living room:

To Iliana... the room seemed a version of what her parents believed a rich person's house, or at least an American's might look like. 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 parent's 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)

The passage quoted above is one of the few instances in the novel when a remembrance of the Dominican Republic is presented and, as described, Iliana ascribes cultural meanings to material objects. This process of assigning emotional value to objects and places is called *place identity* in environmental psychology. The concept of place identity, though introduced in the 1980s, is explained by Marco Antonsich as what “defines the personal identity of an individual in relation not to significant others, but to objects and things and the spaces and places in which they are found” (122). The “environmental past” of an individual plays a key role in the formation of place identity since these are “the product of experiences, feelings, attitudes, and values, which are not only unconscious, but also conscious” (Antonsich 122). Because Iliana migrated to the United States as a child, we can only assume that her memory of the Dominican Republic is restricted by time: that is, she can not remember much of her homeland. As a result,

the emotional links of what homeland is for her have therefore shifted to these material objects, which have come to represent her feelings, attitudes, and values. For Iliana, the home furniture has ceased functioning as equipment and accessories suitable for living and have transformed into signifiers that ignite national inscriptions and homeland reifications that define her identity as a Dominican woman. Similar to Antonsich, this time talking about the “material geographies of home” among Polish migrants in London, Ayona Datta illustrates how material objects that are part of the transnational nature of home are critical in the formation of national political identities. The author states that “‘home installations’ . . . can become the site of memory and identification” while at the same time becoming sites of contestation of power that situate identity (Datta 518-19). Through this lens, in Pérez we see that the house’s Dominican furniture was, at one point, a set for transgression—claiming a Dominican identity against acculturation. However, Aurelia’s redecoration (replacing the Dominican furniture for items that are inherently “American”), places against each other competing narratives of cultural representation. The novel leaves Aurelia's reasons for redecorating to an intimate "American" style unanswered. This shift in cultural representation, however, is an act of disidentification that leaves Iliana's discovery of her Dominican roots empty. Iliana’s discovery that homeland is *away* and *home* can be the only place that reproduces it, informs us that both the Dominican and American representations of *home* are, at their core, performances of culture.

Pérez reproduces the prevailing writing strategy that sees spaces as imprints of the socio-spatial dialectics. The author presents these socio-spatial imprints by staging Iliana’s return highlighting the role spaces play for her as a mean for identity formation. It is noticeable throughout the novel the importance spatial elements have in terms of the boundaries they create, demarcating spaces that are defined by the subjects who inhabit them. For example, the spatialization of social difference is presented by the representations of Dominican Republic and

New York—geopolitical demarcations that are also defined by subjective sensitive notions. Similarly, the moral and ethic frameworks of the domestic environment can be seen as demarcated by the political spaces introduced by religious, racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries that generate the multiple subject inclusions and exclusions that result in familial conflicts. In this discussion I highlight the importance of *space*—whether physical or political—because it is critically necessary in order to frame Iliana’s return. The role that spaces have in creating a boundary consciousness—in which difference, regulations, and control are erected—allow us to understand the spatial dialectics of Pérez’s home. In this setting Iliana represents an entity that is reentering a space that has already judged her exit and has readjusted to her absence. In essence, Iliana’s return—marked by the upward social mobility implied in her going to college—denotes a transgression of the ordering system in the domestic spatial configuration.

Physically, Iliana’s family home is divided by partitions that keep different family members in their respective spaces. For example, the second floor of the house is reserved for Iliana’s brother Gabriel and his wife Laurie. The basement has been divided in two in order to create bedrooms for Marina and Tico. In addition to creating spaces for the personal privacy of the family members, the division of these rooms is also the physical evidence of the distance the family members have from each other. These partitions erase the ideal image of family unity for which Aurelia strives. These individual sites are carefully protected by each person who occupies them, creating boundaries within the house—borders that are not to be crossed because they represent an intromission of sorts, an unwelcome ingress that subverts individual integrity. The compartmentalization of the house mirrors the many political geographies of the different migrant communities in New York City in the sense that diaspora is a site of multiple locales in which differences of gender, race, sexuality, and ethnic perspectives are at play figuratively and physically. In Iliana’s home each family member is dealing with the problems brought upon as

members of a displaced culture in the city, developing different perspectives towards society, the past, the homeland, and the home. If home is supposed to be the place where individual sensibilities find refuge under similar communal synchronicities, then, this home is one that is bound to collapse because of their diverse perspectives. One way of understanding the novel's title is understanding these spaces formed by difference as the geographies of the migrant home: a place in which diverse interpretations of the migrant experience collide, resulting in disentanglement from each other. Because of her upward social mobility through college education, Iliana is thus borderless, an agent that upon return moves at will in the house, and who is transgressing the household physical and political geographies.

Similar to the individual and private compartmentalization of the home, the narrator carefully describes the characters bodies as spaces that are equally private. Through the descriptions of the bodies we discover bruised bodies, bodies in decay, mentally disturbed, physically abused, and in desperation, represented through the contexts of schizophrenia, unhappiness, violence, and depression. If bodies carry history, then the history of the female body in the novel is perpetuated as violent—a violence that attests to the inevitability of escaping the aggressions of the past, carried as heritage, to the diaspora. These specificities of bodies that convey historical scars are, as Lam poses, a way of addressing the trauma brought by the silences: “The bleeding, mutilated and oppressed female body . . . becomes a figure that disrupts the silencing effects of trauma and evinces the political violence devastating the nation at large (the body politic) in its personal connection to the material effects experienced by the body at home” (37). In the novel, three bodies stand out as marked by these traumatic bruises. The first is Aurelia who, before accepting her mother's spirituality, spent nine months in the hospital after having an emotional and physical collapse caused by the worries of her children living in New York City (23-24). D. Méndez sees this as emblematic of one aspect of the weakened body of the

diasporic community (174), one broken by immigration and over concerns about the pressures of acculturation. The second body is Rebecca, whose marriage to Pasi3n has caused both physical and psychological scars from which she cannot escape. The last one—and perhaps the most puzzling one—is Marina’s body in the form of her schizophrenia. Her mental state, I argue, influences and drives the story until the end. Through her character we see the body as a space of contention with the liminal sensibilities brought upon migration, as well as with the conflicts the religious order brings upon them—which presents the body as a space that needs to be protected, and also as a place of sin that has to be expurgated from its rottenness. Through Marina’s we see “the direct ramifications of this immigration process at a psychological level” (D. Méndez 174). However, since Pérez never clearly explains the origins of Marina’s mental instability, the idea of a migrant resorting to madness due to migration may seem, to some, implausible. Nonetheless, the psychological effects of migration have been studied in Clinical Psychology as stemming from the tension of dislocation and cultural adjustments. In “The Psychological Impact of Migration: Practice Consideration in Working with Hispanic Women,” Ana M. Leon and Sophia F. Dziegielewski make the distinction between true mental illness and psychological symptoms that are transient and habitual in the context of cultural adjustments that could result in “culture-bound syndromes” for women migrants (69-70). What I find alluring in this article is the link the authors create between these “habitual” symptoms and mental illnesses in women. The authors argue that the challenges women face through migration could develop in stress reactions, which result in “psychological problems that may evolve into mental health disorders” (70). These mental challenges stem from tangible challenges (difficulty in language, adjustment to different climate, and adaptation to a large city) to coping with the integration of different values such as the break up of the family, and racism (Leon and Dziegielewski 70). As mentioned before, Pérez seems to point to Marina’s rape as the moment that determined her racism for blacks and that,

along with the family's disregard of her experience, prompted her fragile mental state that eventually dictates her position to the home structure. Also, I mentioned Marina's position towards the home is one of insubordination debasing the power structure Papito has created. However, aside from this, Marina's mental health is so substantial, and her position against the home is so powerful, that in one of her hallucinations she attempts to burn the house down hoping to get rid of the problems that affect the family (13-14). Similar to Marina, Aurelia and Iliana are not exempt of any of these culture-bound syndromes. Aurelia spent nine months in the hospital (23-24), and Iliana often wonders "if the bewilderment she had felt throughout most of her life had been shared by her sisters and was that had triggered Marina's breakdown" (191). According to Leon and Dziegielewski these episodes described above are common for migrant women who are head of households when they realize "that her husband, her children and her extended family challenge her traditional cultural values" (70). Leon and Dziegielewski also make the point to highlight the role that spiritualism plays in influencing their mental states. As some migrant women adhere to a view of the world that places them at the mercy of God or divine intervention, this belief system "can also in some cases reduce a sense of ownership, responsibility or empowerment" (72). As a whole, Pérez's novel can be read as the female character's journey to empowerment and agency—away from hierarchies of power that religion and patriarchy have come to represent—with each resolution as different depending on their individual experiences. Aurelia's journey to agency began after Marina's suicide attempt. Rebecca, on the other hand, was forced to individualism when her mother aided in Pasión's death. Conversely, Marina began the novel in a *place of defiance* in which her refusal to obey orders is "justified" by her mental state. Even when prompted by mental illness, her disobedience cannot be considered unconscious due to a lack of insanity because her mental illness is in actuality a psychological response to patriarchy: a bodily response to the external conditions

outside of her self. Unlike Aurelia and Rebecca, Marina's position within the family structure at the beginning of the story is one of agency, thus allowing her to be the one "who has the firmest grasp of the origin of the family's dysfunctions" (D. Méndez 174).

It is this context of spaces and power battles where Iliana is immersed when she returns home. For her, the sensitive charges that home evokes in her are complicated by the power dynamics at play. Home is not only a battlefield of power plays, but it also becomes a campground of sentiments, an emotional site which each family member strives to save from diverse structures of power that weakens their individualism. The success of each character's endeavors to save it will facilitate their level of insertion in the narrative of home that, as an account that has excluded all female characters, will also determine the intensity of their sense of belonging to this space. Even when Iliana possesses a different knowledge than that of her family, she has not completed her journey to agency by continuing to abide to the dictates of power over her body. Her return home is the final journey to attain the agency that other women in the family have been acquiring at different moments and by different degrees, and to develop her own reading of the home narrative.

This journey began the moment she arrives in the house and meets her mother and sisters. While gathered in the living room, Iliana, Rebecca, and Aurelia are engaged in conversation and Iliana comments on how different the house looks to the point that she cannot even recognize it. Marina asks Iliana if she can "smell it" (30). When Iliana fails to recognize what she means, Marina

yanked her skirt above her naked hips. Revulsion contorted her [Marina] face as she parted the soft, shaved area between her thighs to pull from it what only her eyes could see. Then, enacting a pantomime of something wriggling in her hand, she dangled empty fingers before her mother's eyes. (31)

I agree with D. Méndez who sees Marina's act as a symbolic castration of an invisible phallus off of her body (176), thus symbolically confronting and challenging the patriarchal patronage that organizes the family structure. Marina's acts in the home—the burning of the kitchen, the suicide attempt—are branches of her efforts to become part of the house, trying to “reinsert herself in the narrative of the home” turning her into a Kristevan abject who is relegated to the basement, away from the rest of the family (D. Méndez 175). Similarly, we need to consider that all the other women in the novel also share Marina's subjugation at different levels. Marina is not the only one who is striving to rewrite *home*; each of the other female members are also contending to insert themselves and write their own narrative of and for it. If, on one hand, Aurelia is rewriting her history by including the Afro-Dominican heritage, then Iliana is trying to bring back home the knowledge of the outside world she has acquired when she left. At the same time Marina is trying to undo the preexisting narrative and build a new home, dramatically from the ashes that her failed fire attempt would have allowed her to do. Her reinsertion to the narrative of the home is a rewriting of it: one that would erase the traces of patriarchy and will facilitate women's individuality and agency. Iliana's return represents the confrontation between competing narrative rewritings embodied in her and Marina. In this sense, Marina is concerned with Iliana's return because she represents the restructuring of the home she so wants to destroy.

Upon her return, Iliana began to share Marina's bedroom and, in a house where private spaces are jealously guarded, Iliana's intrusion into Marina's space represents the insertion of an alien entity in an unwelcoming space. It is in this moment of the story when another rape takes place, in which Marina violates her sister Iliana with her fist. As the narrator states, Marina's attack is in reality an attempt at castrating her sister since, due to Iliana's sexual ambiguity Marina believes she is a man (275-79). This act of castration is both an attempt to rid Iliana of the phallus for Marina—the element that defines her submission—in the same way she did to

herself at the beginning of the novel. The repetition of castration is Marina's attempt to insert Iliana into her reading of the family language of oppression, the phallogentric structure of the home.

Considering the religious ideologies that regulated and structured the home, this rape episode can be seen as a transgressive response to the repression of sexuality within the religious order. After all, this was a family "in which it was taboo to express intimacy or to expose their bodies" (282), and in which sexuality was silenced along with the many other things their religion proscribed. However, if we take into account the spatial and body dynamics of the house, the subliminal forces and narrative voices Iliana and Marina began to represent at the end, this rape has more symbolic representations and connotations that relate to disidentification. For example, if we accept Marina's symbolic castration of the phallus in both herself and Iliana as a disidentifying-with-ideologies act, then her action is what Lam calls a move from silence to testimony, a bodily representation of trauma that enables a healing possibility (38) and a reconstitution of the self (42). However, this reconstitution of the self and healing possibility is different for both characters as the consequences of Marina's violent act have different results.

Aurelia and Papito accepted Marina's mental condition after the rape and decide to send her to a mental institution where they hoped she would find help as well as aid in the resolution of the family's conflicts. In this context, Marina's attempt to subvert the power structure of the family pushed her further outside of the home, locked outside of society. This outcome presents her as a casualty of the patriarchal heritage of the homeland and, as a migrant subject; it addresses the legacy of migration (the tensions of dislocation): one that in some cases cannot be usurped or erased, and that haunts migrants, recursively playing in their everyday lives. For Iliana, however, Marina's attack is filled with nuances, especially if we consider that *rape* seems to play an overarching theme in the novel whose connotations are related to issues of identity

formation. For example, Marina's alleged rape by a black man is described as the singular event that prompted her current mental state. This, in turn, aided her in disidentifying with the discourses that structured the home. Similarly, after Marina's suicide attempt Papito remembers an eerie encounter with a neighboring girl in the Dominican Republic. This girl, with whom he had been in love, was pregnant: the product of rape by her own father. After venturing out during a hurricane—most likely in order to escape from the home and her father—the girl runs into Papito, only to fall into his arms and die (145-61). The reproduction of incestuous rape in both Marina and Papito's stories represents the transplantation of violent and oppressive structures of power in the Dominican Republic to the American setting: hierarchical and authoritarian configurations that, if taken Iliana's family as example, continue to be the root of migrant's identity conflicts in the diaspora. If Iliana's return and rape by her sister represents an assault to the symbolic return to the national home, we witness then the impossibility of return—the blockade to the longing of embracement—and the impossibility of a validation from the homeland. The narrator tells us that,

She [Iliana] had wanted, more than anything, to belong. Having spent years plotting how to leave only to discover, when she finally did, that she felt as displaced out in the world as in her parents' house, 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 to confront the prejudices she had encountered during eighteen months away. (312)

The embracement from the home Iliana expected from her return means more than a family welcoming reception and speaks of the need of re-insertion to roots, a reconnection with her ethnic heritage and, in sum, an exercise in identity (re) formation in order to develop the tools needed to go back out to the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic world she encountered when she left the first time. These goals, however, were thwarted when she experienced the rejection of her family and, through Marina, the act of being raped becomes the ultimate rejection of

home. In this sense *home*, as refuge, is destroyed; it stops being the structured moral sanctuary, repository of national values, and becomes a space that is equally dangerous as the outside world.

When discussing the epistemological significance of psychic trauma in rape victims, Karyn L. Freedman indicates that a woman's emotional state is volatile, resulting in a "shattered self" as well as a "shattered worldview" (105). The author argues that this develops a new set of beliefs that are inconsistent with previously held ones as "[t]he survivor struggles with the question, 'What am I to believe?' and in some cases the answer leads to a full-fledged rejection of the old belief in favor of a new one" (105). Similarly, after the rape, the epistemic hurdles Iliana went through since the moment she arrived home conflate with the emotional and cognitive responses to the rape experience. This ends with her rejection of the belief of *home* as an ordering structure. Pérez dedicates the last chapter of her novel discussing the dissonance of this relationship of home-knowledge and rape, in which Iliana moves from negation and justification to acceptance of what has happened to her: acknowledging that she has been "marked" by the experience (306). At the end of her reflection Iliana realizes that she despises her blood (311), but makes the determination of not letting the rape affect the rest of her life: "*no no I will not have this life I will not have this blood which also flows through my sisters veins...*" (sic) (311). She recognizes that she will not be able to interact with her family again because she felt displaced at home (312). Rather than becoming an obstacle for Iliana in the same way that it had affected Marina, the rape becomes a transformational experience for her. It now represents a new boundary of consciousness: a confirmation that home is not always a welcoming space regardless of the spiritual, emotional, and cultural connections one has with it.

The end of the novel presents a confrontation between Iliana and Papito when he hits her for arriving home late at night the day after the rape (312-13). In contrast with other

confrontations with Papito, this encounter is defined by Iliana's blatant resistance against his authority through defiance (through immobility and muteness while he attacked her). As he hit her, rage and revulsion grew in her—the accumulation of years of subordination—and through her contempt she equated him with “brute” men, for which she cannot forgive him (313). For Iliana, Papito's attack became a vehicle to reclaim her body, as well as an instrument in her determination to leave home for good (313). When he finished his attack, she simply asked: “Are you through?” aimed to mean “as well was he through with life, with pride, with the righteous man he had believed himself to be” (314). Later on, when Papito comes to ask for forgiveness, Iliana is not able to provide that for him. In her reading of his body she saw “a man conscious of having failed his children and fostering no hopes of being redeemed before their eyes” (320). This presentation of the defeated father figure represents the ultimate success against patriarchy, and results in a claim for individualism and agency. Like her mother before her, Iliana realizes that she would hold herself accountable for her own actions and responsible for her own life (321). Her decision to leave home and not return (or not return to it as she was) does not mean to be disengaged from it. She knew that she was always going to be linked to home and to her family, even if not rooted to it (321). Leaving the migrant home in Perez's novel is a negation of it as a site that is not easily translatable to the diasporic conditions. Iliana's second move away from home represents an opening to a different view of the meaning of home while using her experience in it as the means that will give her the strength to continue, this time moving to a different space. This displacement presents an opening to a new type of fate and implies a new approach to adaptation outside of the home education.

If, as D. Méndez states, “[t]he experience of *feeling* at home in the diaspora... depends on the sensation of belonging somewhere” (177), in Iliana's case *home* is, outside of the physical home as Aurelia realized before. It becomes a state of mind that negates it as being rooted to a

geographical location. Iliana strives for home and belonging to a “somewhere” that is not centrally located, and this places her in a “nowhere” that turns home into an “anywhere.” Lacking a home, however, is not to be homeless; it is (to borrow a term from Homi K. Bhabha) to reach an “unhomely moment.” For Bhabha,

the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (“World” 141)

In Pérez’s case, the merging of polarized borders forces a reconfiguration of spatial consciousness that has moved the author to refuse the recognition of borders. As she states, in her writing, she “negate[s] or traverse borders, not only geographical, but also social, cultural, political, religious, and racial” (Candelario 79). Based on this novel, for Pérez, the migrant home (the home in the diaspora) is another type of border, one that links the traces of the national past to the sensibilities of the present. We can assume that by presenting multiple geographies of home and have in Iliana a character that moves between these borders, Pérez places her in this “unhomely moment” when, as Bhabha states, “another world becomes visible.” This visibility is the result of the “social effects of enforced social accommodations... historical migrations and cultural relocations” (Bhabha “World” 141).

Pérez fits within the group of migrant female writers who move beyond binary geographies of self and other, or the public and private realms, and reconceptualize home by placing it away from fixity. By breaking with these static notions of home through her characters, Pérez allows us to see that *home* depends not only on the social dimension of national contexts and communal representations, but there exists the individual component of intimacy and personal experience that infracts any essentializing interpretations. Iliana’s return home is a representation of the possibilities of different standpoints regarding the homeland for the migrant

subject, one that scores home and homeland as referents but not necessarily as defining sites of subject formation. Inserting this in the conclusion of her novel positions Pérez as a writer who examines Dominican identities in the United States, not as entities placed in liminal dilemmas, but constituted of subjects with affiliations that can be outside of homeland referents.

NOTES

NOTES

¹ This perspective is double. One relates to the act of returning home in which I focus my analysis and the other relates to genre since Santiago and Thomas' narratives were memoirs and Pérez's narrative is fiction. Some migrant writers, like Loida Maritza Pérez and Junot Díaz in the next chapter, do not seem to bound to a memoir in order to articulate the migrant experience.

² Lyn Di Iorio Sandín's *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent US Latino/a Identity*; Lucía M. Suárez's *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*; Myriam J.A. Chancy's "Subversive Sexualities: Revolutionizing Gendered Identities" in *Frontiers: A Journal on Women Studies*; Jill T. Richardson's "Gendered Migrations: The Migratory Experience in Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*," in *Label Me Latina/o*; Cynthia Palmer's "Discursos Espirituales Contrahegémonicos y Resistencia Femenina en *Geographies of Home* de Loida Maritza Pérez" in *Alpha: Revista de Artes, Letras y Filosofía*; Bridget Kevane's *Profane & Sacred: Latino/a American Writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious*; María Luisa Ochoa Fernández's "Family as Patriarchal Confinement of Women in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Loida M. Pérez's *Geographies of Home*" in *Evolving Origins, Transplanting Cultures: Literary Legacies of the New Americans*; and Dolores Alcaide Ramírez's "I'm Hispanic, not Black: Raza, locura y violencia en *Geographies of Home* de Loida Maritza Pérez" in *Ciberletras*.

³ Among the authors they mention: Bergman, Barbara R. *The Economic Emergence of Women*. New York: Basic Books. 1986; Humphries, Jane. "Women's Employment in Restructuring America: The Changing Experience of Women in Three Recessions." In *Women and Recession*, ed. Jill Rubery, pp. 20-47. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1988; Power, Marilyn. "Women, the State, and the Family in the U.S: Reaganomics and the Experience of Women." In *Women and Recession*, ed. Jill Rubery, pp. 140-62. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1988; and Richmond-Abbott, Marie. *Masculine and Feminine: Sex Roles over the Life Cycle*. New York: McGraw Hill. 1992.

⁴ The narrator hints that Aurelia's rejection is due to her brother's Virgilio suicide in the Dominican Republic. Like Aurelia, Virgilio inherited Bienvenida's preternatural powers but his inability to control them drove him to madness and his eventual suicide (134). Aurelia's rejection then can be questioned since, due to his brother's experience, it does not represent necessarily a rejection to the essence of the Afro-Dominican heritage, but due to fear of not being able to control the powers that come with Santería. Pérez never addresses Aurelia's position towards race, so this issue is one that, I argue, is open to interpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fictionalizing History: Comic Books, Fantasy, Sci-Fi, and the (Re) Articulation of the Past in Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).

“What is more sci-fi than Santo Domingo?
What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (6)
-Yunior
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007).

At the beginning of Junot Díaz's Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Yunior, the narrator, interrupts the story with a sudden annotation at the bottom of the page. This ancillary piece of information, he argues, is important “[f]or those... who missed [their] mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2n1). In the footnote he informs the reader of who Rafael Leónidas Trujillo was: the Dominican Republic's dictator from 1930-1961. Relying on a farcical and sardonic language to parody Trujillo's tendency to self-assign honorific titles while at the same time trying to convey Trujillo's power over the Dominican people, Yunior describes him in the following way: “He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2n1). These references to “Sauron,” “Arawn,” or “Darkseid” are not inventions of the author, and are neither to be found in ancient mythology or in the long list of narratives in literary history. These allusions refer to characters found in popular culture: fantasy novels, science fiction, and comic books. Throughout his novel, Díaz frames the story within the realm of these *speculative genres* (Genres), those fictional works that are not based on attested reality and are constituted of settings and elements conceived out of speculation and the writer's imagination.¹ In the novel, Díaz's main protagonists are interested in these forms of popular culture and the author uses these genres as

references to describe people and historical events. Referring to Trujillo through this kind of imagery, Díaz establishes a picture that links that part of Dominican history to an imaginary world from the very beginning of his novel. This chapter inquires on the role that these popular culture references play in Díaz's narration about the life of a Dominican boy looking for love in Paterson, NJ, and how they relate to disidentification.

The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao follows three generations of a Dominican family and centers on the title character, Oscar De León Cabral. The narration moves between Oscar, his sister Lola, and his friend Yunior's present in the United States to the story of his family in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato before Oscar's mother migrated to New Jersey. Contrary to the other narratives discussed on this dissertation, this novel presents characters who are no longer bound to the rigidities of the domestic structure of home, but they are still struggling to find their place in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environments of their city. However, Díaz's characters are not necessarily constrained by these social and cultural discordances because they are social beings in contact with the rest of the migrant and ethnic communities and, more importantly, with their ancestral land. These characters move at will in the city; they have managed to receive an education in college; and are already aware of their position as racialized subjects in the United States. Contrary to Iliana, who defined her Dominicaness away from home in the previous chapter, Díaz's characters have received a strong heritage education, as evidenced in their constant trips back to the Dominican Republic to visit their families. Yunior, the narrator, concentrates his story on Oscar and the events that lead to his *brief life*, interspersed with the stories of his grandfather, Abelard, and his mother, Belicia, in the Dominican Republic. The novel's transnational and multi-generational story arc discloses the history of Dominican migration as a result of the Trujillo's dictatorship. The story of the first

generation, through the description of Oscar's grandfather Abelard Luis Cabral, narrates the experience of Dominicans in the country during the Trujillo regime as well as the consequences of those who opposed Trujillo. Oscar's mother, Belicia, is part of the generation of Dominicans who migrated to the United States for political reasons. Her story reveals the challenges of the migrant population, the process of adaptation to the new host society, and the difficulties of raising children outside of the homeland. Oscar and his sister Lola, as well as the narrator Yunior, are the third-generation Dominicans in the novel, who were born or grew up in the United States. These characters present the contemporary state of the diaspora, the challenges of growing up in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment, and the processes of assimilation to the American society.

The topics and themes of Oscar's generation are framed in the contexts of the dealings with the ancestral home, discussing the relationship between the individual and the nation in the context of migration, primarily through the presentation of issues of national identity, masculinity, and history. Most of the narrative is told from the point of view of Yunior, who transcribed Oscar's unfinished research project of the family's history, which became the story he tells. This incomplete research project that Oscar started before his assassination coincide directly with most of the history of the Dominican Republic pre- and post- the Trujillo regime. Yunior works as a limited omniscient narrator who recognizes that there are gaps in the story of Oscar's family, as well as in the Dominican Republic's history. The resulting story of the family in the wider context of Dominican history is, however, broken and incomplete, due in part to the lack of archival material that can provide details, but mostly because of optional silences from the people interviewed by him. These textual and contextual silences, or *páginas en blanco* [blank pages] as Yunior calls them, hinder the story of the family, as well as the history of the

Dominican Republic that the narrator is trying to tell. In this analysis I argue that the references to science fiction, fantasy, and comic books that Díaz uses in his novel work as an aesthetic to aid the author in filling in the gaps he perceives in history rather than as loose, cosmetic narrative threads. As second-generation migrants in the United States, it is Oscar and Yuniór² who own the linguistic codes of these speculative genres—an aspect that differentiates them from the previous generations. Similarly, the novel's structure follows the same pattern as well. Section titles such as “Land of the Lost” or “Close Encounters of the Caribbean Kind” (that relate to famous sci-fi TV shows, movies and fantasy narratives) locate the relationship between Caribbean and diaspora within this realm of the fantastic. These references drive the novel structurally and idiosyncratically. Such is the case that only individuals familiar with *The Lord of the Rings* saga, *Marvel*, and *D.C. Comics* (to name a few) would be the only readers capable of understanding the meaning behind these references, concepts and nomenclatures used to describe family episodes, character portrayals, and historical events throughout the novel. My interest in these references lays in the fact that, I argue, they surpass Latin American references in the novel and become a language in itself.

The location of Junot Díaz's analysis at the end of this dissertation responds to his focus on popular culture knowledge. This focus locates his characters at a higher degree of acculturation in the diaspora, which makes his novel stand out from the other narratives discussed so far. On the previous chapters I have traced the development of disidentification through conflicts of culture (Santiago), racial identity (Thomas), and the concept of *home* as a metaphor for the nation (Pérez). However, Díaz emphasizes *history* as a matter of concern for the diaspora. As a result of this emphasis, many critics have concentrated on the analysis of Dominican history within the novel, tying diaspora to the nation. My aim in this chapter is to

analyze the treatment of history, not as one that bridges the diasporic site with its nation, but as one that speaks of disidentification. From the onset it is important to the thesis in this chapter that I establish my view of the use of the Genre fiction (the knowledge of this language) as the distinctive sign of disidentification in the novel. This is true when we consider that Díaz and Yunió rely on a language whose bases are cemented on mainstream white American popular culture traditions that eclipse Latin-American referents in order to talk about their past.³ The disidentification aspect that is at stake here is the consideration of national history as part of diaspora identities. As such, my analysis aims to give insight on two questions: 1) How does the use of this Genre language relates to identification with the homeland through references to superheroes, space ships, intergalactic quests, and battling evil etc.? 2) How does the discussion of the history of the Dominican Republic relate to disidentification in the novel? Because my analysis concentrates on the novel's treatment of Dominican history as handled and organized through this language, I argue that the use of references from mainstream white American popular culture adds a rhetorical force to the Dominican voices that speak of their country, while displaying disidentification.

In order to answer these questions, part of my analysis will focus on the current scholarship of the novel and their interpretations of the narrative's history treatments. This discussion aims to give insight about how the novel is conceptualized within current cultural interpretations that places it within a larger Caribbean context. I offer my own interpretation of the language in the novel as a point of departure from this scholarship in order to explain how the novel fits within the new theorizations of historical fiction novels.

In the second part of the analysis I discuss the author's relationship with history, and his position as a diasporic writer who shares a history with the Dominican Republic. I arrange my

analysis around Édouard Glissant's concept of the "longing for the ideal of history" (79) as a circumstance of the post-colonial writer in her/his search for, and understanding of, the past. I contend that through his narration, Díaz presents three conflicts with history that are relevant to him in his text. I also argue that in Díaz's novel, the impossibility of compiling a Dominican history is what drives the author to use the Genre language in order to tackle the problems he finds in historiography. In this scenario, I will explore the need for history, not as condition of knowledge of the past but as a vehicle that delineates difference with the homeland.

In the final part of the analysis, I embark on a textual analysis of the novel. For this analysis, I discuss the relationship between Genre language and the novel, and how Díaz merges the two through the analysis of the two epigraphs which serve as heading to the novel: one from Saint Lucian-Trinidadian poet Derek Walcott, and the other from a 1966 comic book issue of the *Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. I argue that these disparate epigraphs hold the key to understanding how Genre and history serve as vehicles to read the novel as one that deals with issues of identity formation in the diaspora. In this part, I also examine the three generations portrayed in the novel, and their positions towards history and *fukú*, a curse the narrator states haunts Oscar's family and people in the Caribbean nations. With this analysis I intend to show how disidentification works in the different stances Dominican generations take on history. In the end, I argue that through this language of the Genres Díaz both appropriates Dominican history and disavows it. The analysis will reveal how the presentation of history dissembles its purpose as history is mythologized through the presentation the *fukú* curse.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao uses of various genres and literary traditions have been a matter of discussion since its publication. As T.S. Miller explains, we can only compile a

partial genealogy of the various genres in the novel because it borrows aesthetics, structures, and references from the immigrant novel, the family saga, the secret history, the Latin American *novela del dictador* [dictator novel], the body of Dominican American literature, and “the African Diaspora tradition” (92). Scholarship about this novel has concentrated on a wide variety of topics as a result of the novel’s heterogeneous configuration. The novel has been analyzed from the perspective of Transnational and Hemispheric Studies (B. Flores), the construction of blackness in literature (Solís), the “spectral” exploration of identity in a Transamerican context (R. Pérez), the writer as a superhero model (Mahler), and the process of writing as a form of dictatorship (Sáez; Vargas).

Other critics have analyzed the novel from a historical perspective. These critics see the novel as contesting counter-hegemonic discourses that present an interrogation to insular identity politics, authoritarianism, and/or historiography (K. Acosta; Heredia; Vargas; Mahler; Hanna). For example, Kiley J. Guyton Acosta argues that Díaz challenges constructs of *hispanidad* and masculinity by addressing the ellipses of Dominican history (66). Juanita Heredia offers a broader interpretation when she states that “Díaz reverses the power balance of narration by using the fictitious genre of the novel to contest the ‘truth’ of official history books to show multiple perspectives on the past” (219). On the other hand, Jennifer Harford Vargas and Anne Garland Mahler, see Yunió’s writing in the novel—with its own silences and providing his own views of Oscar’s family and Dominican Republic’s history—as equating the repressive dynamics of a dictator. As Vargas posits it, the novel plays on the tensions between the two definitions of *dictate*: as authoritarianism, and as the act of speaking words aloud that are to be transcribed (8). It is in this sense where Vargas and Mahler see writing as having the same potential for repression. Their readings however differ. Mahler sees Yunió as “the writer as superhero” that

exposes tyrannical power by acknowledging the written word's dictating tendencies (120).

Vargas, on the other hand, sees in Yuniór's writing a "hope for an end to authoritarianism, for the appearance of the disappeared in the archives of fiction and history" (26). This "appearance" of the subject in the margins of history is also proposed by Monica Hanna who sees Díaz's treatment of history as images of fragmentation, reassembly, and restoration. For this critic, the restoration effort discloses Dominican history's ellipses while calling for a revision of historiography (498). This author states that the novel "strives for a 'resistance history,' which acts as an alternative to traditional histories of the Dominican Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes and genres" (500). This resistance history, Hanna argues, attempts to write a new history in two fronts. First, a history of the Dominican Republic via the presentation of a nation with a history ("filling the historical void"), and second by presenting history as part of a greater Caribbean history that can accommodate the diaspora (516).

This aspect of "a greater Caribbean history" has been discussed by many of the critics who have approach the novel from this historical perspective (Mahler; Vargas; R. Pérez; Hanna). This is because Díaz opens his novel presenting *fukú* as a curse that still haunts the subjects in the Americas (and by extension Oscar's family). Díaz describes the curse in the following way:

Fukú americanus, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World... No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we've been in the shit every since. Santo Domingo might be *fukú*'s kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not. (1-2)

By opening his novel with *fukú*, Díaz establishes it as a thematic thread that could explain Oscar's *brief life*, as well as the fate of the Dominicans in both the Dominican Republic and the diaspora. *Fukú*'s relationship to history lays in its association to the colonial Caribbean and its post-colonial forces over time. Vargas best summarizes this curse as a historic perpetuation of

colonial relations of power when she asserts that fukú “establishes a transamerican community through an act of imagined identification across forms of domination, spaces of (neo)colonial violence, and histories of subalternization” (10).

In my reading, I am going to distance myself from this interpretation of fukú in its historic connotation even though I agree with the critics who see its relationship to the history of the Caribbean and colonial forces. My distance comes from the fact that my focus in this analysis is on the subjects in the diaspora and I see this reading as Caribbean-centered. In my view, this historical approach disregards the idea that the presentation of fukú in the novel is offered and filtered by a migrant Dominican subject in the United States (Yunior). This fact has been ignored by some critics who have favored instead an interpretation of fukú as a fantastical element that speak about the Dominican nation alone. In my analysis I take into consideration the role colonial power relations play in the novel, not necessarily as way to disclose conflicts of power in the post-colonial history of the Caribbean, but conflicts of national identification in the diaspora. I agree with Richard Pérez who sees fukú as functioning “as an uncanny bridge linking the Americas in a rhizomatic and transnational network of races, generations, and diasporic locations” (76). The rhizomatic characteristic this critic assigns to fukú is based on Deleuze and Guattari concept of the “rhizome” that describes theory or research that rejects binary and hierarchical interpretations of culture and rejects dualist or binary categories (*A Thousand Plateaus*). As such, R. Pérez sees the links between Caribbean and Diaspora through fukú as “an entropic one” (77), whose inevitable social decline “erode[s] and renew identificatory properties” (113). Putting the diaspora location at the center of fukú allows for an interpretation that considers the role history plays for the diaspora subject as it influences diasporic national identity.

The relationship between the Genre references and the history of the Caribbean is, as Monica Hanna states, a way of tying the diaspora to the history of the Dominican Republic by way of the Caribbean and Latin America literatures (512). However, various critics have interpreted these fantasy elements differently. Hanna, for example sees these fantastical elements in the novel as coming from the tradition Latin America's magical realism (499). On the other hand, Caitlin D. Solis does not see them as attached to Latin America and designates them as a new form of magical realism (48). This interpretation of the fantastic elements as coming from magical realism stems from the aesthetic similarities between the two sources. As Miller posits, both aesthetics are "comparable" because, in essence, there are synchronicities between the fantastical elements. However, Miller argues that they are also "distinct" in the fact that they come from different literary traditions. For this author these fantastical elements relate more to science fiction, fantasy, and comics rather than magical realism because of Oscar and Yuniór's "vigorous" interest in these mainstream white genres (93). Similarly, Catalina Rivera also rejects these elements as stemming from magical realism and calls this suggestion a "façade" displayed in the novel because of the text's insistence to resist classification (28). Daniel Bautista, on the other hand, suggests a middle ground for this conflict when he argues that Díaz reworks the tradition of magical realism in Latin America and Latino writing. For this critic, this reworking of tradition results in what he terms as "comic book realism." In Bautista's concept, realism and popular culture is mixed with the intention to capture the variety of cultural influences that define Díaz's Dominican-American protagonist (42). On this issue of whether or not the fantastical elements come from the literary tradition of Latin American magical realism, I agree with Miller and Rivera who see the prevalence of fantastical elements as stemming from the

fantasy created in speculative genres and mainstream white popular culture. I will discuss later how I see the speculative genre's elements in the novel as the thread that holds the story together.

These critics mentioned above have linked the use of the fantastical elements—whether they understand them as magical realism or stemming from speculative genres—to the diaspora only on the surface. They do not see these references as a language constitutive of a need to rearticulate history in a new form. Instead, they are tied to the Dominican community in the United States only tangentially, because they relate to mainstream white popular culture. Hanna, for example, states that the elements of speculative genres and magical realism allow “for a representation of national history that is cognizant of its various, sometimes dissonant, elements” (500). This assertion links the Dominican diaspora to its homeland simply by the use of these “dissonant elements.” However, the way I see it, dissonance implies incongruity, and the discordant resonance of the term implies a lack of parallelism that detaches *affinity* from the homeland/diaspora equation. I agree with Elena Machado Sáez who argues that Díaz's use of different novelistic genres and literary traditions aims to embody the structure of the diaspora rather than the nation (522-523). I argue that this embodiment of the structure of the diaspora is represented by the role the language of the Genres plays in facilitating the understanding of history and how it influences the perception of the nation from the distance of diaspora.

In my reading both history and Genre language engage with issues of diasporic identity formation directly. Each of them cannot be detached from one another. Part of the reasons why the novel has garnered such a diverse body of scholarship, is because of the difficulty of classifying it within a genre. Rivera posited that the novel resists classification (28). However, I argue that the rearticulation of history through the language of the Genres allows us to categorize the novel inside the theories that classify contemporary historical fiction. In *Redefining Latin*

American Historical Fiction (2013), Helene Weldt-Basson has summarized the multiple scholarly understandings of historical fiction and advocates for a redefinition of the genre that considers the impact of feminism and post-colonialism in these narratives. Weldt-Basson offers four purposes (or categories) of contemporary historical fiction: the search for a national identity (13), the mixture of history and myth (21), intertextuality (27), and the historical novel as symbolic (36). I will discuss briefly how I see Díaz's novel ascribing to these four categories in order to shed light on how the novel takes upon the subject of history to talk about diasporic identity formation.

The search for a national identity in contemporary historical fiction aims to discover “the fallacy of earlier historical novels to pinpoint homogeneous national identity” (Weldt-Basson 19). From the onset in Díaz's novel we see how two aspects that define Oscar's identity as a migrant compromise his Dominican identity. The first one relates to his interests in the Genres, which nobody had said anything about it before, but “suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with capital L” (17). This is because the Genres is not something that interest Dominicans. The second one relates to questions regarding his masculinity because of Oscar's virginity. Being a virgin makes Oscar “un-Dominican” (11) because “this is a Dominican kid... in a Dominican family... [he] was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands” (24). The parts of the novel that deal with Oscar in the diaspora relates to his search for national identity in the form of his unending search for love—which translates into losing his virginity and becoming a “Dominican.”

The mixture of history and myth, the second category of contemporary historical fiction, is present in Díaz's novel through the use of the speculative fiction to talk about history. As modern myths cemented in popular culture, the speculative language “ultimately seek[s] to

illustrate, through myth and fantasy, both how Latin American history at times seems more incredible than fiction” (Weldt-Basson 22). This relates to Hanna’s assertion that “Yunior insists on the almost unbelievable nature of the historical reality of the Dominican Republic” (503), which he can only explain through the mystical language of the Genres. I am aware that Weldt-Basson’s redefinition of the historical fiction genre to include contemporary narratives refers to the Latin American experience with its history. As such, it is necessary to clarify that even as Díaz’s novel is written in English and takes place in the United States, the historical themes he tackles ultimately relate to Latin America. Similarly to Weldt-Basson’s definition, in Díaz “history appears... not as a mere secondary or decorative element, but as an essential part of the message and vision” of the novel (22)—even as this vision, as I argue, aims to discuss issues of national identity in the diaspora.

Weldt-Basson describes the third category, “intertextuality,” as a negation of historical accuracy in favor of “historical realities or subjectivities” (27). Many critics have viewed Díaz’s novel as contesting official historiography, thus rejecting Dominican official history. By way of the speculative fiction language and the other literary traditions he incorporates in his novel, Díaz aims to distance his text from a particular tradition, but Genre “allows for the exploration of alternative worlds that don’t comply with traditional realisms” (Hanna 514). This gives Yunior as a character the license to address his own reality as a subject and by extension, as Hanna posits it, “the reality of the diasporic subject” (514).

For the fourth category, Weldt-Basson illustrates how the historical novel serves as a symbol via a novel by Mario Vargas Llosa in which he employs an example from nineteenth-century Brazilian history to allude to fanaticism in twentieth-century Cuba (37). In this case, Weldt-Basson states that “[o]ne country becomes a metaphor for another’s” (37). In Díaz’s

novel, I argue that the metaphor he uses is the Dominican Republic in order to talk about the diaspora. Even as the Dominican diaspora is linked to their homeland through kinship ties and history, we will see how the Dominican Republic is presented as a separate entity (one country) that becomes, through language, a metaphor for the site of the diaspora.

At the end of her analysis Weldt-Basson suggests the need for further expansion of research in the topic of historical fiction as the genre continues to grow and change (40). Díaz's novel works as an example of the ways in which this new redefinition of the historical novel can include Latin American authors who tackle historical themes of their homeland through the lens of migration. In my view, Díaz's novel proposes a re-engagement with the genre of the historical novel because in his text we have a postmodern novel assembled by a number of disjointed elements that are not overtly tied to dates and historical events from the homeland.

Understanding the novel as a work of contemporary historical fiction through Weldt-Basson's redefinition would allow the narrative to be presented as a text shaped by history but that, in the scope of postmodern fashion, counteracts it by re-recording it in a pragmatic language appropriate for the diaspora experience.

To place Díaz's novel and treatment to history through language within the context of the Caribbean, we need to talk about the phenomenon of "non-history" as put forth by Édouard Glissant in *Caribbean Discourse* (1989). In this work, Glissant proposes "non-history" as a post-colonial condition of Caribbean writers that result from a lack of historical continuity. This historical void is the product of dislocations caused by colonialism that gradually and continuously affect historical consciousness (Glissant 61-62). Throughout his book, Glissant explores this conceptualization through the examination of Latin American and Caribbean

novelists in order to show how they construct alternative imaginative histories in order to oppose non-history.

This opposition is what the critics discussed above have assertively linked to the treatment of history in Díaz's works, in which the narration becomes counterhegemonic (K. Acosta; Heredia; Vargas; Mahler; Hanna). However, this contention to power in Díaz's writing rotates on two different axes. It challenges the official Dominican history, and it contests the powers (and history) that marginalizes the social places of immigrants in the United States. By representing his characters as inserted in the American social and cultural networks through their use and interest in the language of popular culture, Díaz exposes ethnic and racial differences while blurring the societal and citizenship borders between this migrant group and other Americans in the country.⁴ This form of social shading aims (to some degree) to break the social boundaries that promote difference through racism and xenophobia by enhancing popular culture commonalities on a national scale.

Aside from this double contention to power, I want to return to Glissant's notion of the need for history, which he defines as the search for the "primordial source" and "the explanation of origins... which reorients the evolution of the collective drama" (79). For the Caribbean writer, according to Glissant, history materializes in almost haunting ways:

our history emerges at the edge of what we can tolerate, this emergence must be related immediately to the complicated web of events in our past. The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. (63)

The emergence, intolerance, and obsession with history is what leads post-colonial writers to construct alternative histories that would create meaning of the past. From the beginning, Díaz's novel establishes the location of the Dominican Republic and its past for his migrant protagonists. Yunion states that Oscar would say: "What more sci-fi than Santo

Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (6). This quote establishes the Caribbean region as a region outside of reality placed within the confines of fiction from the onset. This imaginative state speaks directly of difference and distance of which the Dominican Republic and its history are found in a fantastical periphery. This way of accentuating the imagined nature of the borders between nation and diaspora is built through the recollection of the stories of the parents and grandparents of the characters, whose past, as A. O. Scott states, has “become a genre in their own right” (9). Scott’s statement presents us with one fascinating aspect of the novel. Put together, the nation as imagined and the past as a genre, we are presented with an absolute fictionalization of the nation in all its embodiments. If Benedict Anderson is right when he asserts that the building of a nation initiates in the realm of the imagination, this process of imagining one’s nation (or the nation of the parents) through a different language alters the dynamics embedded in the process of imagining a community and launches the nation to the realm of fiction. From the point of view of the diaspora, this fictional aspect, is what I see as a way of conveying the nation’s past—its recollection, revision and understanding—as a *disidentification* in the novel. If the Dominican Republic belongs to the realm of the imaginary: How does history fit in this fantasy world? If the novel is, on the surface, the story of a Dominican boy in the search for love in New Jersey then, why is it necessary for the reader to know Dominican history in the first place?

In a 2012 interview for his second collection of short stories, *This is How You Lose Her* (2012)⁵, Junot Díaz indicated that as young adult he wanted to be a historian and finish a Ph.D. in history. However, in the process of growing up as an immigrant in a working class family in New Jersey, his interests shifted towards writing (“Guns”). Born in the Dominican Republic, Díaz came with his family to New Jersey when he was a young child. Similar to other migrant

stories, his father came to the U.S. first, got a job at an aluminum warehouse in Elizabeth, N.J. and his mother and four siblings followed five years later in 1974. In this interview, Díaz indicates that as a graduate student at Cornell University, he felt isolated to the point that he considered graduate school as a form of exile. This feeling existed because he felt as “cut off from [his] roots” and “never felt entirely comfortable away from the kind of people” he grew up with (“Guns”). Considering Díaz’s statements, I want us to illuminate the outline of these “roots” from which he was cut off. Are they anchored in his neighborhood in New Jersey or do they also branch out to encompass the Dominican Republic?

In order to contextualize these questions, we must first return to Glissant’s conceptualization of the postcolonial writer struggling with “non-history.” Glissant states that the writer’s first contact with the past originates through the oral, and “[w]hen the oral is confronted with the written, secret accumulated hurts suddenly find expression” (Glissant 4). These “hurts” relate to “the longing for the ideal of history” (79) as a circumstance of the post-colonial subject in her/his search of the past. Considering the themes he tackles in his novel, Díaz’s desire to become a historian, but eventually becoming a writer, speaks of this “longing for the ideal history” along with a need for reconciliation between his identity as a migrant subject and his national past. Because Díaz is a first-generation migrant raised in the United States, the heritage education received at home becomes the “oral” manifestation of the past to which Glissant refers. This heritage education encompasses the nation’s history, a heritage that carries the discourses from the place of origin that Díaz now translates into written word. In this process, the “secret accumulated hurts” (4) that Glissant alludes to are finally expressed through writing. It is through this writing act that unresolved historical dialogues arise; negotiation processes ensue, giving them shape and, eventually, results in new identity articulations. In other words, if Díaz’s

novel offers a response to hegemonic structures that created official history, the retelling of history also accounts the emotional experience of those who are not part of that history. Due to his status as a migrant writer, those outside of history are diaspora subjects and their identity conflicts as Dominican migrants. As a writer, Díaz serves to exemplify these identity conflicts because he seems to struggle with the classification of him as a Dominican writer. Regarding this classification, the author states that he does not mind being called a Dominican writer even though it is “an exclusive category.” He adds, however, that he believes there are writers of different categories: “People are always trying to simplify you, but I think categories are meant to be the start of a conversation” (“Guns”).

Calling for this kind of conversation begins with his views of his own writing; something that he sees as coming from the Dominican experience as well as an extension of the larger African Diaspora. In itself, the proposed “conversation” is an invitation to explore this history because he considers that there are “huge tracts of our experiences which haven’t been spoken to” (Morales 65). One of the key aspects to explore in these conversations of displaced subjects and their communities is associated with cultural, social and personal strains caused by migration. Of his Dominican experience Díaz indicates: “There is nothing like the trauma of losing one’s country and gaining another” because the experience “makes recollection very, very sharp” (“Guns”). The image of the piercing physical sensation which is caused by *recollection* is presented alongside “loosing” and “gaining a country” in order to present the predicaments of identity formation for the diaspora subject. However, what stands out is the recognition that the country left behind was *lost*. It is in the emotional structures that “loosing” creates where the conflicts originate, which later prompts the need to speak of unresolved historical dialogues as a writer. It is also through “losing” that a *distance* between homeland and diaspora is manifested.

Díaz's proposal for a conversation should be one that connects all the missing historical pieces, their reflections, and absorptions because these are necessary in order to result in identity resolutions. It also needs to consider that this subject's past is localized (placed, rooted) in a different geographical location and that this does not necessarily speak of a puzzling position of liminality and in-betweenness. As we will see in the following analysis, this principle frames *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and it is a continuation of Díaz's early interests in writing topics. While in college, he began an apocalyptic novel set on an island ("Guns"). The catastrophic repercussions to the "island" (which could represent the Dominican Republic) implied in the trope of an apocalypse, shows the interest as well as anxieties caused by the past. In here, by synecdoche, island and historical past are one; and for that insular Dominican past there's no sign of redemption, but a day of reckoning: a judgment day that will result—in typical apocalyptic fashion—with the re-emergence of new ways of living. For or Díaz, if losing a country—either by an apocalyptic doom or by migration—"makes recollection sharp" (*Publisher's Weekly*), one would have to wonder: How history is "recollected" in the novel? Within the narrative structure, where is history located? What, if any, are the conflicts that this re-visitation of the past contains?

In *Oscar Wao* most of the historical references and explanations are placed in footnotes scattered throughout the novel. As a literary device, these footnotes offer factual and interpretative information, as well as alternative explanations (mostly through references to the speculative genres). The use of the Genre language in these footnotes serves as a signpost language that offers a figurative interpretation of historical subjects and events that cannot be articulated through a "common" language. These images of the Genre language are sometimes so convoluted that they become a dense cipher that is hard to decode because of the reader's lack of

knowledge of the genres used. However, the dynamic enclosure created by these ancillary pieces of historical information is not completely detached from the story as they form part of the internal narrative frame. Nonetheless, in the first footnote the first key to understanding how history is perceived as conflictive in the novel is subtly placed.

In this footnote Yuniors talks to those readers “who missed [their] mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” and do not know about Trujillo. (2n1). Of Trujillo, he states: “At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined” (2n1). This statement provides a comment about historians who have compiled the Trujillo era of the Dominican Republic, and about the writers who have tried to collect the history on the margins of official history. For Yuniors, both historians and writers have failed in capturing Trujillo’s power dimensions. Based on the themes discussed in the thirty three footnotes throughout the novel—in which many of them deal with the violence of the Trujillato and its effect on people—it seems irrelevant for the narrator to know Trujillo’s fictional or historical story, if this one is not tied to the power he exerted over the people. In the history of power relations, it is the people’s experience where the *real* history is located. In this sense history (in its fictional or historiographic forms) has not been enough to capture the effects of the Trujillato. Because these narrative vehicles fail, the only way to fill these historical gaps is through the fiction language he uses, the one that the Genres provide, in order to convey the extension of Trujillo’s effect. As such he calls Trujillo Sauron, Arawn, and Darkseid (2n1) in order to transmit his vision of Trujillo as the epitome of evil.⁶

The second conflict with history is presented through Yuniors’s inability to collect and deliver (narrate) history. To gather information about the Oscar’s family as well as the history of

the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato, Yuniór relies on interviews that he has conducted (114, 160), as well as a manuscript and papers Oscar left after his death (200, 330). In this process of collecting information Yuniór encounters the problem of incomplete information, which he calls *páginas en blanco* [blank pages] that he finds in history. Most of these silences embedded in the *páginas en blanco* are related to past events, particularly as they relate to naming characters and places that relate to the Trujillo era. For example, when trying to present information about the Gangster (Trujillo's sister's husband with whom Belicia falls in love), Yuniór indicates: "Due partially to Beli's silence on the matter and other folk's lingering unease when it comes to talking about the regime, info on the Gangster is fragmented; I'll give you what I've manage to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the *páginas en blanco* may finally speak" (119). In this context, *páginas en blanco* is a response to fear of the Trujillo regime, a fear that haunts Dominicans to this day, even in the diaspora. These silences, however, are not limited by fear and to the novel's fiction alone. Yuniór refers also to Dominican Republic's President Joaquín Balaguer's silence as a *página en blanco* when, in his memoir, he talked about the killing of Dominican writer Orlando Martínez (90).⁷ Here we see how the blank pages transcend the fiction and are also placed in the context of the real history of the Dominican Republic. These blank pages belong to history in both its real and fictional realms, but are more pronounced in its fictional form. For example, one of the silences Yuniór encounters refers to Oscar's mother, Belicia and her past in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato. La Inca (Belicia's aunt) raised her after Belicia's father died as a victim of the Trujillato and the rest of the family died under tragic circumstances. Both La Inca and Belicia never talk about this past, which Yuniór calls "[t]heir very own *página en blanco*" (78). Some of these silences are produced by personal choice, either to avoid incrimination with the regime or to avoid past hurts.

One of the most puzzling examples of these páginas en blanco, however, lies in Yuniór as a narrator when he writes: “Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco” (149). The use of the word “Watcher” here has a relation to the compilation of history. Based on the mythology created by Marvel Comics, Watchers are beings dedicated to observe and compile knowledge on all aspects of the universe and who vowed to not interfere with how events unfold in other civilizations. However, it is interesting that Yuniór calls himself a “Watcher” because he participates in the story yet selectively omits or adds information in order to fill the gaps he deems important or meaningless. For instance, when he is talking about Jack Pujols (Belicia’s romantic interest as a teenager), and the relationship Jack’s family had with the Trujillato, Yuniór omits the names of the Pujol’s connections with the regime. In this case, he whimsically prefers to write the first letter of these subjects’ last names, leaving a blank after them (100-101). These silences presence, however, are not there because the lack of information available. In Yuniór we encounter a narrator whose disinterest in the clarification of certain aspects of the past seem to be, in some cases, a matter of personal preference, fear, and in other occasions simple whimsical desire. This second conflict with history, the inability to collect information, is intensified when considering that the narrator keeps information to himself. Acknowledging this further complicates the historical recollection because it shows that the narrator does not want to clarify the past, thus participating in the conspiracy of silence.

These conflicts with history display the compiling of history in its complexities and difficulties through the silences and gaps in its recollection, as well as the impossibility of historians and writers to recollect a comprehensive history. As the main “historian” of the Cabral family, Yuniór is trying to recollect the missing pieces of the past, but we have to question why is it that he chooses to silence certain aspects of it. This reveals the third conflict in the novel: the

narrator's reliability as a historian. Willingly omitting information renders him as an unreliable source even as he embarks on rescuing the family's story. Similar to Yuniór's optional *páginas en blanco*, the story he presents is filled with errors that he acknowledges at times, which enforces the questions about his reliability as a narrator. For example, describing an Edenic scene when Belicia and the Gangster go to the town of Samaná in the countryside of the Dominican Republic, Yuniór indicates through a footnote: "In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa" (132n17). In the same footnote, he also clarifies a popular culture reference mistake previously mentioned in the narration ("El baile del perrito").⁸ This note speaks of his role as a researcher, proving that he had his information reviewed by people he considered more knowledgeable than him in Dominican geography and culture. The footnote also displays his cultural distance to the Dominican Republic because it is his friend Leonie who is the "resident expert in all things Domo [Dominican]" (132n17). However, the attempt to correct mistakes and trying to prove that he had reviewers validate his story, does not guarantee a narration without errors. One unacknowledged error I found lies in the same description of Samaná that he "fixes." In that passage, he describes the town as bordered by the Caribbean Sea (132). Even though Samaná does have beaches, the town is located in the northern part of the island, which would mean it is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. The explanatory footnote mentioned above, as well as these unacknowledged errors, provide information about his lack of knowledge of some aspects of the country, and brings attention to the liberties he takes to fill the gaps left by *the páginas en blanco* and the silences he encounters. By themselves these errors and liberties speak of a distance from the homeland as represented by the lack of geographical or cultural knowledge. The idyllic description of Samaná shows that for his narration, Yuniór also

relies in the discursive tropes of the nation, reproducing the romanticized images of the homeland sometimes produced by diasporic subjects. However, Yunior justifies his errors later when he adds: “Who can keep track of what’s true and what’s false in a country as baká as ours” (139), recognizing his incapacity to compile the family and nation’s history. As a dependable source of information, Yunior is even questioned by Díaz. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, the author indicates that Yunior is: “one of the book's mysteries that each reader must try to resolve for herself.” The author offers the following questions: “Why is Yunior telling this story? Is it as an act of contrition, to explain or exonerate himself, or is it something far less charitable?” (“This Week”).⁹ Whatever Yunior’s intentions are, the control over the recollection of history that he narrates reproduces the same mechanisms he criticizes in the historians and writers that have captured past events, while at the same time mimicing the strategies of silence used by the powers that collected the official Dominican history.

To summarize, what I call conflicts with the past (the critic to historians and writers, the inability to collect the past, and unreliability) speak of the location of history in relation to the process of historiography in the novel. By grouping together these treatments of history we can see that history is inscribed with nuisances; looking closely, these history nuances are presented systematically. They begin with the incapacity of historians to talk about the past in its fullness, and move from the narrator’s own inability to recollect history. Through this process, Díaz is gradually demystifying historical knowledge. This demonstrates, I argue, that the act of remembering and recollecting in Díaz’s novel is not related to a recounting of the past in order to clarify it or record it *as* history. Because some of the information Yunior provides might be deliberately changed, he annuls the homeland’s story as an objective history for the diaspora. Furthermore, from the point of view of the novel as a written piece that attempts to collect an

inclusive history, the silences and omissions renders it as questionable because of its lack of objectivity, which resolves history as impossibility. This impossibility is seen by the critics who have read the novel as critic to historiography through counterhegemony (K. Acosta; Heredia; Vargas; Mahler; Hanna). Hanna, for example, states that “Yunior often employs the use of ellipses and blanks in order to structurally emphasize the gaps in historical knowledge” (506). For this author, this “gap emphasis” is what highlights the novel’s counterhegemonic force. However, this display of gaps and ellipses can be seen in a different way.

In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) Michel-Rolph Trouillot draws attention to the ambiguity between reality and historical texts by questioning the idea of history as a fixed reality. Trouillot is concerned with the origins of history: how is it produced, who contributes to it, and how is the authenticity of the final product (the historical text). Trouillot interest is in disclosing how Power (as the administrator, producer, and contributor of historiography) *silences* certain voices from history. For him, historicity exists in two forms: what happened, and that which is said to have happened. The result of these two forms of history leaves in “any historical narrative... a bundle of silences” (27). In other words, silence materializes at the same time as history is produced.¹⁰ For Trouillot these silences are composed of un-narratable stories, targeted by Power’s “formulas of erasure” and “formulas of banalization” (97-107). These un-recounted events and people become those stories outside of discourse that oppose the events and people who are of historical significance. However, at the end of Trouillot’s study, he suggests that silences in history are necessary because it is through them that we can identify, even if sometimes partially, the parts that have been left out.

I contend that Díaz’s portrayal of *páginas en blanco*, silences, and omissions are not created to present a counterhegemonic response to historiography (to give voice to the

unnarrated subjects of history), but instead they are included to detail how these silences are necessary in order to give access to the margins of history. Exhuming these silences from history's filter is the closest we can get to an unfiltered version of history. However, this discovery is one to be welcomed carefully. Throughout his book, Trouillot suggests that silences can be reclaimed and rearticulated through counter-history (as the critics mentioned above suggest). However, he advises us to be wary of counterhegemonic fictionalizations in our historical retrievals in order to evade new forms of power configurations that recreate history. In Díaz's novel I see the presentation of these silences as recognition of a past history constituted by dents and holes which cannot be filled, but whose acknowledgment are necessary in order to continue with history.

This continuation with history, I argue, serves a purpose only for the diaspora. If Yunió's purpose in the novel is to be the bearer of past knowledge, the carrier of history, then it can be said that this history he offers is, at best, insufficient. This is because the history he is recollecting does not pretend to encompass the totality of the country's past and concentrates only in one episode of the nation's history: the Trujillato. As such, even when the novel's title suggests that this is Oscar's story, a considerable portion of the narration is dedicated to past events that are unrelated to him. The novel shifts in time and moves back and forth from Oscar's present in the United States and the Dominican Republic, to his mother Belicia in the Dominican Republic during Trujillato, and to Abelard Luis Cabral (Belicia's father) in the Dominican Republic during the rise of Trujillo. There are no accounts of Dominican history before or after Trujillo to the point that even the narrator indicates that Joaquín Balaguer, who took over the country after Trujillo for three different consecutive terms, is "not essential to our tale" (90n9). The accounts of the past concentrate on Belicia's origins and the events that led her to migrate to

the United States because of Trujillo. Those events that, as Yunior continuously reiterates, turned her into the “Founding Mother” (115), the “Empress” and “Queen of the Diaspora” (106, 261).

I argue that the retellings of past and present events are two aspects that require two separate analysis in the novel. On the one hand, we are presented with the conditions of the present day diaspora, and on the other, we are made aware of the history that prompted it. In other words, I contend that the story Yunior is collecting is a story of origins—a history *of* and *for* the diaspora. Traditionally these two aspects can be expressed in a temporal continuity, when the second one is a derivative of the first. However, the novel’s approach to history, the language used to represent it, and the conflicts within it, do not propose a historical continuity, but rather a rupture from history. The nation’s history remains important for the diaspora, even when their present is not determined by it.

The “longing for the ideal of history” (Glissant 79) in Díaz’s writing discovers the treatment of the past as a story of origins that explains its birth and through which history and fantasy fiction merge. As I mentioned, the prevalence of Genre language in the novel has been a matter of debate with some critics arguing that some of these references relate to Latin American magical realism. In that discussion I agreed with Miller and Rivera who argue that the fantastical references do not refer to Latin American magical realism because they come from different traditions (Miller 93) and are presented in the novel as a façade (Rivera 28). Miller rejects magical realism as a constitutive element in Díaz’s narration based on Yunior’s disbelief (and at points, negation) when talking about some fantastical elements: namely fukú. For this author the direct references to magical realism made in the novel are based on skepticism that “differ markedly from the sustained magic realism of a writer such as Gabriel García Márquez” (Miller 93). For Miller, science fiction becomes “the genre among genres” (93) as it is the aesthetic that

drives the novel. Even if the narration does not engage with science fiction, fantasy, or comic books on the plot level, as Miller suggests, the speculative genres elements do on a symbolic level. This symbolic level lies in Oscar and Yuniór, who are well versed in the language of these genres. As Yuniór describes, Oscar is a “ghetto nerd” (11) and “hard-core sci-fi and fantasy man [who] believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in” (6). Miller draws attention to the fact that Yuniór was the narrator of Díaz’s previous short story book, *Drown* (1996) and indicates that in there he barely uses speculative fiction references. The abundant inclusion of Genre references in *Oscar Wao*, Miller argues, is Yuniór’s recognition of “science fiction as a legitimate part of literary and cultural discourse” (94). For Ramón Saldívar the insertion of Genre language in the novel is “a way to coexist with the chaos... in the context of the brutal histories of conquest, colonization, exploitation, and oppression in the Americas” (592). In *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-Eyed Monsters* (2007), Heather Urbanski similarly places speculative fiction in the mainstream of public discourse by arguing that these genres are “cautionary tale[s]” used to “scrutinize our [cultural] nightmares and warn about the future” (8). With this definition, Urbanski highlights the social function of speculative fiction in which it reveals the cultural anxieties through a figurative language with which its readers can understand how society operates or can work in the future (8). As Miller states, Yuniór is aware that science fiction and fantasy may not be an appropriate metaphor to describes their experiences in the diaspora when he says that it was Oscar who “believed that [fantasy, science fiction] was the kind of story we were all living in”(6). However, by stating that they *all* live in a different *kind of story*, Yuniór “understands that his own science-fictional lens [is] somehow ‘local’” (Miller 95). This localization gives Díaz’s story a site (the diaspora) *from* and *of* which the story is based rather than being located in the Dominican Republic.

The genres within speculative fiction are traditionally considered as “outsider’s literature” (Aldis 509), and, as such, are often dismissed as less relevant popular culture texts. Fantasy, comic books, and science fiction are genres that differ widely. Historically they have been restricted by specific settings, themes, narrative structures, story lines and atmospheres, which, in turn, answer to specific requirements of publishers and market interests. Of the three, fantasy, typically presents Manichean conflicts of good versus evil in battles of power. These battles take place in “impossible worlds” where the impossibility of reality is prevalent (Manolove 16). The fantasy world is one of magic, sorcery and enchantment in which characters are involved in a quest as part of their journey of a physical or psychological discovery—a discovery that oftentimes renders fantasy novels as coming of age stories (Saricks 36-48). In *The Reader’s Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (2001), Joyce G. Saricks states that some of the themes of fantasy fiction revolve around the retelling of myths and political intrigue in which “the machinations of those who desire or are in power often serve to increase the pacing of the story” (40-41). While fantasy abstains from technology by keeping it at a pre-industrial level, science fiction, in contrast, relies on technology in order to emphasize ideas and challenge the unknown by offering technical explanations through scientific and empirical methods (Saricks 36). As a whole, the genres have “been the domain of writers from developed industrialized (and more recently post-industrialized) countries while fantasy has attracted a more global authorship” (Mehan 2). Fantasy, along with science fiction and superhero fiction (whose main mode of production is the comic book form) are part of what is known as *speculative fiction*, an umbrella term that comprises these fantastical fiction genres. However different, these fictional worlds become real to the reader in the sense that they correspond to their own set of rules which follow their own fictive and internal logic, even when set outside of reality. The relevance of

these genres' themes to Díaz's novel lies at the intersection between fantasy and science fiction's structures and themes because they share a similar associations with the "in-between" status of subjects in the diaspora. Saricks indicates that both science fiction and fantasy deal "with otherness of time and place" (37), which resembles the sensation of being "different" or unbelonging characteristic of dislocated subjects as portrayed in many literary narratives. The aspects mentioned above, such as the impossibility of reality, the quest/journey, the retelling of myths, conflicts of power, and dealing with the unknown, are reproduced in Díaz's novel as part of the negotiation processes when dealing with the homeland. Similarly the hero's struggles with power, as presented in comic book fiction, functions in *Oscar Wao* as a metaphor that resembles these same negotiation processes in the diaspora (represented more markedly in the novel through the conflicts with history). The hybrid nature of comic books (graphic storytelling and visual narrative), not only take us to the analogy of the diasporic subject's body as hybrid, but also can be seen as an invitation to read the novel as such: in which each dividing section of the novel represents a comics' panel, imitating a succession of frames that incite us to see beyond the written word and turn the narration into a pictograph that complement and enhances its meaning.

It is within these narrative and thematic structures that Díaz places his novel. The author argues that the popular culture references are present because that is what Oscar "used to make sense of himself and the world around him," and as such, the book "honor[s] Oscar narrative predilections" (Moreno 541). However, when we think of Díaz as a writer, we would have to wonder: Why Genre? The answer lies in the need for history and its language. The author understands that "what we call 'Caribbean history and culture' is, in reality, one vast silence" of which people do not want to talk about (Moreno 539). This reticence, he argues, exists because

“[t]here’s not even [a] language” to talk about history (Moreno 539). For Díaz, this void is filled by Genre language because “the disposable frivolous junk narratives of genre are often the best metaphors and the best explanations, and contain most clearly and most beautifully, much of the hidden histories and terrible scars of the New World” (Moreno 541). The author adds,

[i]n comic books there is more of the New World than in the literary fiction, and so therefore, if I’m writing a book about the deep history of the Caribbean, I had to find its echoes where they reside, and I would argue that that would be in all of the marginal, hybrid forms, like comics, science fiction, apocalyptic movies, and even role playing games. (Moreno 541)

Simply put, for Díaz, Genre language helps transcribe history. For Díaz, a diasporic subject, Dominican history is a foreign language. He frames Dominican history within the wider history of the Caribbean in the search for meaning of his ancestral past but he runs into the problem of speech. He cannot articulate this past in the conventional language of his ancestors, of his homeland. Consequently, he turns to the language that, for him, can articulate this past—the one that only the Genres can transliterate. Saldívar indicates that “fantasy is no longer simply a private, licentious matter creating a world of pleasure without the obligation to what is permissible or possible outside of the realm of fantasy” (592) in its link to history. Fantasy, as Jason Dittmer has stated in his analysis of comics books, becomes a “new ‘optical unconscious’ ... that holds open opportunities for more plural, flexible narratives to emerge” (223). In *Oscar Wao*, the link between fantasy and history creates a critical responsibility to look beyond the written word, deep where they converge in order to discover the novel’s authenticity.

Díaz’s gives us the key to understand the relationship between history and the fantastical through two epigraphs from two distinct sources: from US popular culture and from contemporary Caribbean literary production. The first epigraph is a quote from a *Fantastic Four* comic book issued on an April 1966 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, titled “If this be Doomsday.”

The epigraph, which has caught the attention of critics because of its comic book origin, reads “Of what import are brief, nameless lives.... to Galactus??” If we understand the novel as a way of talking of the experience of a second-generation migrant in the United States through this language of the Genres, this quote takes on important relevance because it establishes a mode of approaching and reading the novel: the understanding of *nameless lives* in relation to their *import*. *Import* here can present two conceptual connotations. On one hand it introduces the notion of a foreign object (or idea) inserted in a different space—in this case the insertion of the *brief, nameless lives* to a new site. On the other hand, *import* questions the value of such *living object* in terms of its significance, its importance. Consequently, questioning the *import* of multiple *lives* implies a search for meaning and signification, an inquiry of origin and value. In this interpretation, *import* introduces a confrontation of places and contexts, intersections centered in these *lives*, as well as it promotes an examination in which such *lives* should be read and understood.

It is important to contextualize the relationship between being unnamed and being named, because Oscar does have a name in the novel. The narrator, however, changes his name from Oscar De León to Oscar Wao, a play on words between his given name and Oscar Wilde. This change can be understood as part of the variety of code switching in the linguistic-phonological context, which references the in-between condition of the character. Nevertheless, changing his name is a form of misappropriating Oscar from his original one, negating its origin’s semantics (that of his Latin roots) and, it can be said, detaching him from his past while placing him inside dual identification. This semantic relocation determines, in part, his *imported* condition.

Decoding the origin of these imported lives is contextualized through Díaz's use of a second epigraph, this time by Caribbean poet and dramatist Derek Walcott. The excerpt taken from the poem called *The Schooner Flight* (1986) presents its protagonist Shabine, who "stakes out a claim for his particular Caribbean identity as a nation, one without border or a name" (Fuller 323). The excerpt from the poem used by Díaz ends with the verse "either I'm nobody or I'm a nation." In a 2011 interview with Junot Díaz, Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat links the two epigraphs under the "notion of namelessness and the idea of brief lives and how individuals and nations disrupt and end lives" (Danticat and Díaz 89). The discussion that ensued between the authors conceals the notion of nation building in literature through the image of a person. In this discussion, Díaz states that poor dark people, lacking masculine traits like Oscar, are not usually part of a nation's self-conception. In his creation of Oscar, the author indicates that he "wanted to start with a different kind of erasure" stating that "in the Dominican culture I know, someone like Oscar would not be labeled Dominican, no matter what his actual background was" (90). In these tropes of erasure and rewriting of the nation's history, we encounter a Dominican character who "talks" about the nation without necessarily embodying it. Based on Oscar and his interests in the Genres, he transforms into a "nerd" (as defined by the lexicon used in North American popular culture discourses). This characteristic positions Oscar within the boundaries of what defines American identity, locating him inside the United States popular culture structure (however marginalized he would be due to his racialized-ethnicized condition). The other reason why Oscar is not characteristic of the nation relates to his masculinity. As Yunior tells us, Oscar "had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male" (19). His weight, the clothes he wears, and the fact that he is a virgin had turned him in the "neighborhood's parigüayo" (19)¹¹ Yunior explains that "[i]t wasn't just that he

didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes" but that "he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies" characteristic of a man (15). By not conforming to the normative discourses of masculinity, Oscar does not fit within the discourses of Dominicanness, hence he becomes invisible, *nameless* in the Dominican Republic context. In their conversation of Oscar's masculinity, Danticat and Díaz refer to the notion of "disruption" and "ended lives" through and by the nation in the context of identity. In view of the fact that Walcott's work addresses the problems and anxieties of the liminal status of the West Indies in the post-colonial period (Hirsch), I argue that Díaz's novel can be read as a narrative that addresses these same identity anxieties from the point of view of the diaspora.

Similar to my focus on the epigraphs, Hanna and Saldívar both analyze the epigraphs focusing on the idea of "nameless lives." However, different from my focus on identity, Hanna sees these unnamed subjects as figures that power has placed outside of history, not considered in the historiographies of the nation (499). Saldívar, on the other hand, considers Oscar as the product of two nations—uncomfortable in both the Dominican Republic and Paterson, NJ. He relates the epigraphs to homelessness because of the oscillation between being "nobody" and being "a nation" as the end of Walcott's poem suggests (586). However, Saldívar links the use of the *Fantastic Four* quote to the fantastic and to imagination, indicating that the "escapist qualities" of fantasy transcends reality in order to construct alternative realities (586-87). The obstacle with this approach is that it focuses on the language of fantasy as an aesthetic and not on how the language functions and what accomplishes in the novel. By focusing on "homelessness," Saldívar disregards the problems that the feeling of not having a home (a nation) poses on identity. This author, however, assertively indicates that Shabine (Walcott's poetic voice) is the Antillean Creole word for *mulatto* and *mestizo*, and highlights that this signals hybridity as the

answer to dispersal of identity (586). Yet he disregards this crucial element of hybrid identities when he indicates that Genre language works “only as an effect of the imaginary” (586). My interpretation of both epigraphs, that is my focus on *namelessness* and on *being a nation* lays in the understanding that not having a name or a nation equates to not having an identity. In this context, *namelessness*, aside from presenting no identification, presupposes something also unacknowledged, somewhat unutterable. Knowing the *import* of a *nameless* life, requires a process of signification in which its meaning entails a redefinition that considers not only its individual conflicts and defining traits, but its historical foundations as well: The political dynamics of the *unnamed* body, its displacement from one space to another and the influences/consequences of that dislocation in relation to their origin.

If we revisit Díaz’s response about nation building through character representation in his interview with Danticat quoted above, it is interesting his carefulness and clarification when talking about the Dominican Republic and its representation in his novel. The mention of “the Dominican culture *I know*” (emphasis added) (Danticat and Díaz 90) brings to the forefront of the narrative the recognition of multiple points of view of the nation’s politics when related to diverse issues of identity and culture. Similarly, it also addresses different viewpoints when talking about the nation from the diasporic position. This interpretation of the *Fantastic Four* and Walcott’s epigraphs relate not only to the challenges of assimilation in the diaspora, but also to conflicts of identification based on the encounter with the United States culture and the knowledge of the Dominican culture and its history. In Díaz’s novel, the challenges—or “hurts” in Glissant’s words (4)—the diasporic subject faces when dealing with their own identity are not caused by the host society’s social, cultural and political discourses, but rather by the diasporic subject’s own traditions and heritage as they are acquired through heritage education and return

migrations. In other words, the diasporic Dominican subject's identification with the homeland is shattered (despite the idealization and nostalgic sentiments towards it) because of their inability to define Dominicaness from the diaspora.

I contend that Díaz's proposition "to start with a different kind of erasure" (as he told Danticat above) works as a strategy that relates to the manner in which "nations disrupt and end lives" (Danticat and Díaz 89-90). This suggests a singular understanding of the past: one that appropriates history and disavows from it. This hypothesis is based on the correlation between Oscar and Shabine (Walcott's poetic voice in the *The Schooner's Flight*). In her analysis of Walcott's poem, Mary C. Fuller indicates:

[I]f Shabine is the product of history, the weight given to him suggests that he is something for the future as well, in that he first names an identity shared by many. In giving *a* name, 'Shabine,' to a nation as yet nameless and outside of history, the poems offers itself as a founding myth of Caribbean identity, a myth for the hybrid self now made to know, possess and give voice to his own history. (324)¹²

The same way that Shabine folds together local history with mythic history as a way of negotiating with the past in Walcott's poem, the underlying strategy in *Oscar Wao* is, I argue, to present Dominican history as a myth created through the Genre language. This narrative strategy presents the diasporic characters as outside of that history and addresses the past and present in order to give voice to their *own history*. In this sense, Díaz's *namelessness* and *naming* of diasporic subject formation through history articulation simulates Walcott's Shabine nation-naming. In other words, through his history's treatment, Díaz presents the idea of a "founding myth" for the diasporic subjects. As it is created, this myth gives resolution to the problematic details of the past (those *páginas en blanco*) and, as a result, it eases the present.

In the next pages I will focus on a textual analysis in order to show how disidentification is presented in the novel and how it results in the formation of a "founding myth." For this

analysis I take into consideration the readings I put forth in the previous discussions and focus on exploring history and fukú as the elements that display disidentificatory traits and diasporic identity formation. In *Oscar Wao* history becomes a generational concern. Oscar, Lola and Yunior are the main narrators and writers of the story,¹³ and they are the ones who articulate an interest for the past. Of the three Yunior is the one who takes up the task of telling the story of Oscar's family and putting together Oscar's research and notes. Yunior is a character who has appeared in various stages of development throughout all the works written by Junot Díaz (*Drown*, 1996 and *This Is How You Lose Her*, 2012). This recurring role as a narrator seems to place Yunior as a figurative site of historical construction. In *Oscar Wao*, Yunior compiles and divides the story in parts that, separate time and events geographically, but are not organized chronologically. As we know the narration is divided between two sites—the Dominican Republic and United States—and three major events: the story of Oscar in the present time and his difficulties with finding love; Belicia's life in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato, and Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral (Belicia's father) during the first 16 years of Trujillo's rise to power. This generational structure of events speaks of generational demarcations, as exemplified in the many instances in which Yunior refers to one and another generation as "old timers" (127) for the generation before his, and "postmodern plátanos" (144) for his own generation. This division presents contrasting views on fukú, and social, political, racial, ethnic, class, and gender understandings. Similarly, history is valued differently by these generations.

The title of the section that tells the story of Abelard Luis Cabral lets the reader know what to expect from this portion of history. The chapter, titled "Poor Abelard, 1944-1946" (211), tells the story of Oscar and Lola's grandfather, a respected doctor and writer, and "one of the most remarkable minds in the country" (213). Because of his elevated class position, Abelard

had social contact with Trujillo and his story concentrates on “the bad thing” (227) he said about Trujillo. The “bad thing” relates to a joke about not having bodies in the trunk of his car (the way Trujillo’s henchmen disposed of opponents). Abelard was accused of libeling the dictator, which led to his life-long arrest and the “Fall” of his family.¹⁴ La Inca, a contemporary of Abelard and his cousin, raised Belicia after all the members of her family died and she became Oscar and Lola’s grandmother. These two characters who witness Trujillo’s rise to power represent the generation that endured, first hand, the effects of the dictatorship. On one hand, Abelard is presented as an innocent victim, and on the other La Inca instills in Belicia the importance of remembering her past (“Remember, your father was a doctor, a *doctor*, and your mother was a nurse, a *nurse*”) so that she could play, as Yuniors puts it, “the key role in a historical rescue mission” (81). However, Belicia does not fulfill La Inca’s wishes. Her family was decimated and she was taken as a *criada* (child slave), before La Inca knew of her cousin’s destiny. Because of this experience as a *criada*, Belicia grows into a rebellious teenager who drops out of school and falls in love with Trujillo’s sister’s husband “The Gangster.” Through her rebellion and her romance she is also presented as a victim of the Trujillato, which forces her to leave the country and move to the United States where she meets Lola and Oscar’s father.

Because of their chronological and spatial distance with the Trujillato, these three generations offer different viewpoints in regards to the regime; hence their different relations with the past differ as well. For example, La Inca’s longing for the past is class related and mirrors Abelard’s interest in writing and history (229). Her interest, however, presents a nostalgic sentiment of a pre-Trujillo past that she experienced and misses. On the other hand Belicia “had the inchoate longings of nearly every adolescent escapist, of an entire generation” that would make her talk “about how trapped they all felt” (80) in that “un-country” (128). This

sentiment characterizes her as having an “inextinguishable longing for elsewhere” (77). In Belicia’s case, the proclivity towards leaving the Dominican Republic is presented as a natural inclination because “she wanted, with all her heart, something *else*” (79). National identification and the idea of fulfillment are not synchronized in this case: “Her whole life she had tried to be happy, but Santo Domingo... FUCKING SANTO DOMINGO had foiled her at every turn” causing her to “never want to see it again” (163). Her desire to leave the country is so ingrained in her personality that Yuniór indicates she was “clearly: one of those Oyá souls, always turning” (79). In Yoruba mythology Oyá is the spirit of change, transition and chaos, which relates to her inclination for something more. Conversely (and contrary to La Inca and Oscar’s generation) Belicia shows no interest in remembering the past, because “she wasn’t a maldita ciguapa, with her feet pointing backward in the past” (81).¹⁵ Her desire to leave the country was so pronounced that it would not have mattered if the conditions surrounding her were different. Yuniór writes that “it wouldn’t have mattered if she’d been a princess in a high castle or if her dead parent’s former estate, the glorious Casa Hatüey, had been miraculously restored from Trujillo’s Omega Effect. She would have wanted out” (80). It is suggested throughout the novel that this feeling of wanting out is based on her discontent with the country because of the Trujillo regime. Aside from the reference to her generation feeling “trapped” (80), Belicia, however, does not express any political position towards Trujillo even when she, at one point or another, was surrounded by people who opposed the regime (110-111) and it was rumored that Trujillo killed her family. Belicia represents that part of her generation that did not show any political standpoint and no interest in transgressing social and/or political orders. Contrary to La Inca, Belicia does not long for the past.

Oscar's generation's perception of the past is more complex. Given the intertextuality and use of Genre language in the novel, I contend the perception of the past for Oscar's generation is both a representation of the ambiguities embedded in the processes of negotiation with past experiences, and also a form of resolution with the conflicts it creates. This is true considering how Yunior, on many occasions, rejects history and places it as a subtext of the story as well as his approach to the origin of the family's story, which is the job he embarks to do from the beginning. Yunior indicates that the family always starts their historiography with the story of Abelard and "the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo" (211). This beginning appears irrelevant for him as he writes that,

[t]here are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards "discovered" the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography? (211n22).

As a beginning of the Leóns story, Yunior decides to talk about fukú as "the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (1). This reveals Yunior's intention to tell a story that is not founded on the de Leóns, even as he suggests that he will respect the family's wishes for a beginning of their history. Yunior follows the presentation of fukú with Oscar's life as a diasporic subject and how diaspora and nation relates to them. In this sense, his interest in the colonial past displays how he uses the family's story as a platform in order to present the effects of the colonality of power (the legacy of colonialism) in generational and transnational identity formations outside of the homeland's past. This argument explains his indifference for important historical events, such as the death of Trujillo. Trujillo's relevance throughout the novel is established right at beginning when Yunior describes him as fukú's "hypeman of sorts," fukús "high priest" (2). Similarly, his role as antagonist of this story is clearly stated when Yunior

compares him to Sauron, Arawn, and Darkseid (2n1). Trujillo's portrayal as a powerful foe lays in this link to fukú: "No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*" (2-3). However, as an enemy/villain of heinous proportions, Yuniór only briefly acknowledges Trujillo's real life death and relegates the death of this evil power to a footnote (154n19). If Trujillo—as figurative malevolent force or as a person—was central to the story, one would have to wonder why the narration of his death is dismissed to a side note. Considering that the novel opens with the fukú curse as a trope of creation of the New World and ends with Yuniór wondering about Oscar's niece and her relationship to fukú, we can see that Yuniór's real interest lays in the history that pertains to his present. Absent from this dynamic with history is the desire for a past on the island before Trujillo (like La Inca). However, what remains present is the desire to not look backwards (like Belicia). Through Trujillo's death footnote we can see Yuniór's penchant to alienate a thematic proclivity of history. This is why most of the narration of historical figures and events is presented on the margins, in footnotes throughout the novel. By providing additional information, the footnotes produce a breakage in the diaspora narrative's continuum, thus creating a distance between past and present. This narrative technique emphasizes Yuniór's preoccupation with his diasporic present, instead of his national past. As a result, Yuniór divides the story in two histories. The first one is the story of Belicia Cabral, the history that has been told in many other migration narratives: the one that presents the reasons for migrating, the problems of assimilation, and the struggles of identity. The second history, is the story of Oscar's generation: those who are dealing with the conflictive past of their ethnic land from a second-generation standpoint. What I contend here is that Díaz's approach to the diaspora presents a broader view of the effects of colonialism in transnational contexts through

the prism of hybrid subjectivity configurations, rather than a traditional visitation of diaspora conflicts filtered by divided (and divisive) transnational ethics and subjectivities. This reading of Junot Díaz's novel presents it as one delineating a possible *state beyond migration*. As Hanna posits, Díaz is "part of a rising generation of Latino writers who explore Latin identity as not necessarily constituted by the notion of a lamentable 'in-betweenness,' but rather one that offers a multiplicity of possible affiliations" (517). I propose that the *state beyond migration* relates to the multiplicity of affiliations. In this state, I argue, a subject identifies with both homeland and host society's cultural, social and political structures, but this not *necessarily* present a conflict with them.

Multiple affiliations that speak of different identity positions are clearly presented in the novel through the perceptions of fukú in Oscar's generation. Critics have read fukú as a hermeneutic lore that speaks of relations of power in a post-colonial context that creates a link between the homeland and the diaspora. I argue, however, that fukú does indeed speak of these relations of power but its belief also creates multiple standpoints that reveal a distance from the Dominican Republic. As a structuring trope of the text, fukú is a systemic narrative organization that inserts the historic past in the diaspora. The multilayered textuality of the novel does not allow this organization to be neither definite nor absolute. That is, when Yunion meshes fukú with fantasy, it allows fukú to be anything and everything. As a result, this perception of fukú as fantasy creates multiples points of view. When Yunion specifies that it is Oscar who thought that fantasy "was the kind of story we were all living in" (6), he distances himself from Oscar and establishes that Oscar's perception of their reality differs from his. The distance between them reveals different understandings of the present and the past and, by extension, we witness how the homeland and the diaspora are processed differently by members of the same generation.

These understandings can be seen more clearly in the way the concept of fukú is presented in the novel. Of all the fantasy elements used by Díaz, fukú takes center stage as it opens and closes the story. Fukú's providential force threads the narrative's structure because the story's argument invokes it as influencing the destiny of Oscar's family. For the narrator, the curse is a Dominican folk tale, a popular belief that is acquired through transferred heritage education in the diaspora. Oscar, Yunior, and Lola, stand in different positions *in regards to fukú*. For example, the first time Oscar is sent to Santo Domingo with his sister Lola, he dedicated most of his time to "being a real writer" (31). At this point La Inca encouraged his writing and he wrote two science fiction/fantasy books that summer. Through La Inca, that same summer, he learned a bit of information about his mother's past and "[h]eard about the family curse for like the thousandth time." However, "strangely enough [Oscar] didn't think it worth incorporating into his fiction" (32). Part of the reason why fukú is irrelevant for Oscar at this point comes from the explanation immediately given by Yunior: "I mean, shit, what Latino family doesn't think it's cursed? (32). This assertion presents the understanding of supernatural forces as homeland beliefs and legends. This perception has generational and, I argue, national connotations because it draws a line between generations as well as between nation and diaspora. As an example, while explaining the origins of fukú at the beginning of the novel, Yunior clarifies how these beliefs belonged exclusively to the nation: "You live as long as I did in the heart of fukú country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time. Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family" (5). However a couple of sentences later, even when he dismisses fukú as a folkloric tale, he adds: "It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these 'superstitions.' In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you" (5). The use of "superstitions" in quotation marks in this sentence

speaks of an underlying story in the novel that reveals the transformation Yúniór had in terms of his belief in fukú. At the beginning of the novel he is not clear about his point of view regarding fukú and when he states: “Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point,” (5) he is trying to divert attention away from his transformation. As the story continues we discover Yúniór’s previous perception of the curse. When Oscar is recovering from a suicide attempt and Yúniór visits him, they have a conversation regarding the reasons that led Oscar to try to kill himself. In the conversation Oscar tells Yúniór: “It was the curse that made me do it, you know.” To which Yúniór replies: “I don’t believe in that shit, Oscar. That’s our parent’s shit” (194). Yúniór’s answer at this point contradicts what he tells the reader a couple of pages before when he is meditating about him not paying attention to the signs of Oscar’s depression:

I guess I should have fucking known. Dude used to say he was cursed, use to say this a lot, and if I’d really been old-school Dominican I would have (a) listened to the idiot, and then (b) run the other way. . . . My mom wouldn’t even have listened, would have just run. She didn’t fuck with fukús or guanguas, no way no how. But I wasn’t as old-school as I am now, just real fucking dumb. (171)

This last remark indicates that at the time of Oscar’s depression, Yúniór did not believe in fukú, but that at the time of the narration he apparently does. This shift seems to come by way of Oscar’s assassination at the end of the novel, which prompted Yúniór to consider that Oscar’s fate was due in fact to the curse.

The importance of Yúniór’s transformation lays in the fact that his shift serves as a way of perceiving the generational nuances embedded in fukú. Yúniór indicates that his mother would have run if she had heard Oscar saying he was cursed. However Yúniór did not run because he wasn’t “old-school” because believing in fukú was “our parent’s shit” (177). This generational division of fukú presents a marker of difference in the context of the ancestor/descendant

relationship and also in the perspective of nation/diaspora: “Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story” (5). Even when these two aspects draw a line between diaspora and nation, the relationship with this belief is not that clear because the three main characters in the diaspora have different perspectives of fukú. For example, Oscar is not interested in fukú to the point that he would not consider it for his writing when he visited the Dominican Republic. However, later on he believed he was cursed. Yuniór, on the other hand, did not believe in fukú, but his doubts as to whether or not the curse is real encouraged him to write the story, wondering if his “book ain’t a zafá¹⁶ of sorts,”(7) a counter spell to fukú. Even though he does not believe in the curse, apparently he contemplates that it could be real. Alternatively the third diasporic character, Lola, states clearly that she does not believe in fukú: “If you ask me I don’t believe there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life” (205). The range of these perspectives of diasporic subjects towards fukú creates grids of difference and associations with the homeland. This multiple relational dimension discovers the contradictory cultural force of fukú as representative of the nation’s past—one that the diaspora subjects must deal with on an individual and collective level.

For Junot Díaz, similar to the critics who have read fukú in the same manner, the curse encompasses the historical trauma of the creation of the Americas because it is a curse whose origin is linked to the arrival of the European conquerors (Danticat and Díaz 90). The author has stated that by recognizing this trauma, one should pretend not to vanquish the curse it brings, but rather to acknowledge its existence on a collective level (Danticat and Díaz 90). Acknowledging the colonial trauma is for Díaz the “essential challenge for the Caribbean nations,” not because it can be overcome but in order “to be a true witness to who we are as people and to what has happened to us” (Danticat and Díaz 90). Being “a true witness,” rather than active agent

working to overcome the trauma, suggests a passive position towards the legacy of imperial power. This idle position is a form of antagonism because in its acknowledgment it recognizes the trauma but looks in other directions. This is the underlying subtext in Díaz's narrative: disidentification with the trauma, not only of colonialism but also of migration. As a synopsis of colonial trauma, the presentation of *fukú* by subjects in the diaspora speaks of the insertion of that Caribbean belief into the United States and also a return to the origin, a journey to the root of the trauma. The same way that *history* was reassessed through the popular culture language of the Genre, *fukú* is also associated and revisited through the same language. As such, *fukú* is treated the same way history is treated in the novel. Its presence exists in order to be acknowledged, have it reassessed, and render it as accepted. As a result, I argue that for the diaspora *fukú* plays a different role than it does for the homeland: the articulation of a myth that works as a foundational fiction for the Dominican diaspora. As such, *fukú* can be seen through to different perspectives: from the perspective of it as a nation's popular beliefs, in which the curse represents a condensation of the Dominican people—again, “Everybody in Santo Domingo has a *fukú* story” (5)—and viewed from the diaspora as a cultural marker of the homeland. This last perspective is presented through different levels of attachments/detachments in terms of the diasporic subjects who believe in it: some subjects may not believe in *fukú* (Lola), others believe in it (Oscar), and others doubt it (Yunior). I contend that there is a third perspective in which *fukú* needs to be examined in order to elucidate its purpose in the novel. This third perspective relates to its presentation through the language of the Genres.

From the beginning of the novel Yunior links Trujillo to the fantastic through his references of him as “Sauron,” “Arawn,” and “Darkseid” (2n1). He also links Trujillo to *fukú* when he writes that “[n]o one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's servant or its master, its

agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (3). This coding of Trujillo within fukú and fantasy references does not make him a fictional character in the novel because he indicates that Trujillo was “a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2n1). The distinction made here between fiction and reality creates a separation between Trujillo as real life-historical figure, and Trujillo as an all-powerful-fantastical figure. If Trujillo could be at the same time a real subject and be fukú, then what does the fantasy language to describe him represent in the narrative?

In his understanding of the origins of literature in the post-colonial Caribbean, Édouard Glissant links myth with literature and history when discussing the multiple histories that form the Caribbean region. The author focuses on the position of the Caribbean literatures (Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, Creole) in its role of dealing with the fractured histories resulting from colonialism. In his essay “The Quarrel with History,” the author analyses a paper written by Jamaican poet Edward Baugh in which Glissant highlights the cultural and literary concerns of the following concepts: the historian as poet, the novelist as historian, and history and the project of writing. Even though Baugh talks mainly about the Anglophone Caribbean, Glissant indicates that the recurrence of these themes is constant in the “meeting points between Caribbean literatures” (61). Díaz, by various degrees, has tackled these same concepts in the narrative through Yunió’s act of writing.¹⁷ In the same discussion Glissant indicates that literature works aiding the ordering knowledge of the past as a way of organizing the historical consciousness (73). The relationship between history and literature surges from the urge to write, and this urge can be trace back to myth because its function—when confronted with the historical consciousness—is to reveal and confer meaning, to obscure and clarify, and

also to produce history. Glissant argues that the organizational principle of myth relies on linking the opposing notions of “nature” and “culture”. These two notions are the problems of the historical consciousness of the Caribbean because “nature”—as a concept representing an individual’s “relation with its surroundings”—does not participate in the time continuum with “culture”—the “accumulations of experiences” of the individual. This clash creates a discontinuous relation between the two, rendering history as a challenged/problematic concept (61-71).

Viewed through Glissant’s understanding of myth, we can see how Díaz frames the Dominican Republic’s history with fukú as the epicenter of myth. Díaz, I argue, organizes his narrative through fukú in order to present a broader approach to post-colonialism in the diaspora context. The presence of fukú in the Dominican diaspora is convoluted because it cannot be understood completely as a myth that encompasses the Caribbean due to the many converging histories in the region. Nonetheless, the author places the curse in the Dominican Republic, at “the heart of fukú country” (5), demarcating fukú to nation (as a representation of lore) allowing for these post-colonial conflicts to be temporarily situated in the diasporic site through heritage. For Díaz, writing about a Dominican genesis from the United States aims to display Glissant’s notions of culture and nature as forces that struggle to make sense in the diasporic subject’s past/history frameworks. Glissant’s “culture,” becomes that which the second-generation migrant is aware: the oral compilation of history, past social politics, cultural practices, and language. “Nature”, on the other hand, becomes the knowledge gained from the upbringing in the host society: the social and political acquisitions due to cross-cultural contact, the multiple steps of assimilation, the knowledge gathered from the processes encapsulated in the personal “in-between” state, as well as the different ideological and discursive forms of the social order in

which she/he lives. The nature/culture dichotomy is, for Glissant, part of the development of a natural genesis in the journey of ordering-knowledge of history recording. This process concludes with nature as subjected to culture (73). However, through Díaz's three main diasporic characters, this dichotomy presents multiple affiliations when seen as fukú. As myth, fukú is a cosmogonical force in the sense that it pertains to organize the chaos that is the past. It is a method of transforming the past in order to ease the historical consciousness of the diasporic subject. As an etiology of evil, placing fukú as a myth of origin is problematic since it does not speak of a glorified sense of birth or an idealization of origins. Hence, the conceptual framework the narrative establishes as foundation of a diasporic history is one that is doomed and subject to failure from the beginning. This may be the reason why the narrator says, "My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo's payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú." (5). However, by having characters like Lola, who does not believe in fukú, Díaz offers another possibility to this idea.

Glissant indicates that through myth "histories would no longer weigh so heavily on consciousness and self-expression" (76), and the ending of the novel presents this idea as well. Years after Oscar was killed in Dominican Republic, Yunior indicates that he thinks and dreams about him constantly. Describing one of the dreams Yunior says,

[w]e're in some kind of ruined bailey that's filled to the rim with old dusty books. He's standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask... Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look... I want to run from him, and for a long time that's what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank" (325).

This passage is of important relevance if we consider the fact that both characters struggled to write a history of the family. It ends after Yunior notices the empty book: "behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafá*" (325). As a counter spell to fukú, *zafá* in this context of

páginas en blanco, could mean the release from the curse, the possibilities of writing a new history, *from* and *for* the diaspora.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao presents the diaspora as a site, not only of confrontations and struggles of identity, but also as a location of lapses in memory and historical reincarnations. Whether an acknowledgement of past colonial conditions or a perception of transferred cultural traits, deciphering fukú leads to identification with the past that leads to different notions of history recognitions, as well as interlockings of the complex relationships with it. Acknowledging fukú is a reconnection with the past, a re-statement of past knowledge and the reconciliation with it. In the diaspora context, history awareness has a genealogical standpoint that vocalizes the logic in which the diasporic subjects can understand themselves. In Díaz's novel, history goes beyond revisionism and challenges of discourses. Its narrativization through the Genre language is wordplay—a witty manipulation of the meanings and ambiguities of the diasporic past. Its mode of operation toys with the traditional narrative nature of historical knowledge. The novel's narrative strategy lies in relegating history to a value filtered through Genre narrative's linguistic codes. This language creates a landscape of absurdist contexts in which history can be either accepted or rejected by the reader. As readers, we have no choice but to subjugate history to an internal logic that we may not understand but that dangerously could lead us to interpret the author's aesthetics as a humorous writing strategy, or accept it as part of the realm of imagination. The desired ideal of a unified, unequivocal and coherent history in the narrative falls to its extinction as myth. Turning history into myth decomposes its imbalances, sterilizing its negative effects by marginalizing it to the realms of imagination. It is not an erasure of it however. History as myth remains existent: considered, relevant, yet concealed. It fixes it in a specific time and space, comprising its sites, its events, and its hurts. The difficulty of

knowing one's history as a diasporic subject is the result of these transmitted "hurts" from previous generations. The urgency of making sense of the past is a natural response, a reaction to the cultural transmissions of heritage education. What seems to be ahead is to question the extent of disidentification processes: Will they turn into full-fledge disconnection with the homeland over the generations? Will there remain a cultural artifact that will be remembered?

NOTES

NOTES

¹ Throughout this chapter I will be referring to fantasy, comic books and science fiction as *speculative genres*, *fantasy* or *Genre* in order to encapsulate these genres under one concept with the intention of simplifying its use. Likewise I will be talking about the *United States popular culture* when referring to these genres in order to summarize the popular culture knowledge acquired by the diasporic subjects in the novel and its form as a language in the narration. However, there exist a distinction between these genres. All of them are part of what is considered as paraliterature, which includes popular, pulp and commercial fiction, as well as comic books and genre fiction. Genre fiction, in turn, includes works of science fiction, fantasy, mystery, crime, horror, romance, etc. Generally, *genre fiction* is a term that distinguishes these literatures from *literary fiction* since literary critics oftentimes disregard the former.

² The character of Yunior appeared for the first time in Díaz's work in his short story book *Drown* (1996). In there we learn that Yunior was born in the Dominican Republic, which would make him a member of the first generation. For synthesis purposes, on this chapter I am going to refer to him and Oscar as members of the second-migrant generation due to the fact that he was raised in the United States.

³ I use “mainstream white [American] popular culture” in order to encompass the origin of the speculative genres. However, not all of them are the product of US popular culture as some of the references also come from the English tradition. My intention is to mark the distinction between the *white* origins of this language, as opposed to a language that is rooted in Latin America.

⁴ By “other Americans” I refer to white, middle class Americans since—as portrayed by popular media (movies and television shows)—the “nerd” belongs to this specific racial and ethnic group. This the reason why Oscar can be considered an oxymoron since, due to his ethnic and racial background he does not fit the image of the “nerd” that popular culture and media have typically presented. Until recent years, with the popularization of “nerds” in the United States mainstream media, their representation has shifted to include individuals of other races and ethnicities.

⁵ To date, Junot Díaz has published three books: a short story collection: *Drown* (1996), a novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012).

⁶ Sauron is the main antagonist in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Ring* trilogy (1954). Arawn is also the main antagonist in Lloyd Alexander's fantasy series *The Chronicles of Prydain* (1964). Darkseid is a tyrannical ruler and one of the most powerful beings in the DC Comics universe.

⁷ Joaquín Balaguer was the President of the Dominican Republic for three-non consecutive terms (1960-1962, 1966-1978, and 1986-1996) after Trujillo's death. Under Trujillo's presidency, Balaguer served in many governmental roles and was considered an efficient public aide of the dictatorship. Orlando Martínez was a member of the Dominican Communist Party

and a journalist. As a columnist in the daily paper *El Nacional*, Martínez criticized Joaquín Balaguer's presidency until his death in 1975.

⁸ “El baile del perrito” is a song popularized by Dominican merengue singer Wilfrido Vargas. In the novel, the mistake Yuniór makes is in positioning this popular culture reference in the decade the song came out (Late eighties/early nineties).” However, on a whim, he decided to leave the reference in the novel, even if incorrectly, “because [he] liked the image too much” (132n17).

⁹ In order to understand Yuniór's intentions Díaz suggests a reading of the novel linking each character to Marvel's *Fantastic Four* mythology. In this interview Díaz indicates: “The novel contains a guide to help a reader crack the Yuniór narration enigma, but you have to know a little bit about the comic book series ‘The Fantastic Four.’ Each of the family members is explicitly linked to one of the Four—Oscar is the Thing, Abelard is Mr. Fantastic, Belicia is the Invisible Woman, and Lola is the Human Torch.... So if the Family is the Fantastic Four, which character in the comic's mythology is Yuniór linked to? We know he takes on the role of the Watcher throughout, but that's one of his masks. There is someone else.” The author adds that, once the enigma is resolved then, as a reader, we can decide “whether Yuniór's motives for telling the tale are positive, negative, mixed” (“This Week”).

¹⁰ Trouillot phrases it in the following manner: “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)” (26).

¹¹ Díaz dedicates a footnote to explain the origins of the Americanism *parigüayo* (19). In short, the word refers to a person who is considered silly, stupid, slow, dumb, dull, unimportant, or unintelligent depending on the context. Díaz explains that the word originated during the first U.S. occupations of the island from 1916-1924. At the time, Dominicans called the Americans “party watchers” because they used to go to Dominican parties and remained on the margins of the event. *Party watchers*, phonologically, turns into Dominican Spanish as *parigüayo* (19n5).

¹² Fuller analysis is far more revealing. The same way that in *Oscar Wao* the narrator appropriates the past, “Shabine insistently claims an *affiliation* with History. But this history turns out to be not so much the narrative he seeks as silence. History refuses to perform its function: will not remember, will not speak, will not deliver a narrative of origins or trace the linkage of the present to the past” (328).

¹³ Oscar constantly wrote novels and papers that, after his death, Yuniór keeps in a refrigerator in his house (330). He also tried to collect information regarding the history of his grandfather Abelard while in the Dominican Republic, but could not find anything (243). Lola, who kept a journal that she “was sure would form the foundation for a utopian society” (65), helped Yuniór collect family events by authoring a couple of chapters in the novel.

¹⁴ Throughout the novel the narrator refer to these events as “The Fall.” The unfolded events resulted in all the members of Abelard’s family dying—his wife Socorro and their two daughters—leaving Belicia behind. This made her the “Child of the Apocalypse” (251) or “the daughter of the Fall” (126) since she was the only survivor of the family’s tragedy (or curse).

¹⁵ A *ciguapa* is a mythological creature of Dominica lore. With backward facing feet, it is difficult to tell the direction in which the creature is moving.

¹⁶ *Zafá*, as the narrator explains, is a counter spell to protect you from fukú: “A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of the fingers)” (7).

¹⁷ An interesting link is also found in the fact that, as Glissant indicates, Baugh’s main argument on this paper is provided by an analysis he did on the work of Derek Walcott, from whom Junot Díaz uses a poem for the books epigraph.

AFTERWORD

National Identification in Disidentification Processes

The processes of acculturation that subjects experience upon migration are complex because of the infinite ways in which the hostland's social, cultural, and political structures impact individuals and communities. For example, for second-generation migrants these processes can be even more intricate because these subjects were raised away from the ancestral land yet they develop cultural ties learned at home through heritage education. By analyzing different migrant generations and different periods in the acculturation process, I have intended to readdress the experience of Dominican and Puerto Rican migrants in the United States in order to see the ways in which they *respond* to the hostland's social, cultural, and political structures. For this analysis, I focused this response in the ties the migrant subjects keep with their ancestral land. This approach is not unique to my project, many critics have explored this topic arguing that many migrants maintain social, political, and economic ties with their homelands (Fouron and Schiller 2001; Toro-Morn and Alicea 2003). However, my project sought to expand these interpretations by focusing on another side of this diaspora/homeland equation: analyzing the instances in which migrant subjects detach themselves from these ties. My interest was informed in part by the experiences of many migrants who had returned to their home countries only to encounter rejection from their fellow countrymen—who found them to be assimilated to a culture that is not their own. Two of the writers discussed in this dissertation have had this particular experience upon their return to their homeland. Both Esmeralda Santiago's experiences in Puerto Rico (Hernández 163) and Loida Maritza Pérez's return to the Dominican Republic (Candelario 89), were marked by the difficulty of return due to this perception of assimilation. My critical interest in this project stemmed from these interpretations

of “difference” as perceived by the homeland’s subjects, and to understand in what part of the acculturation processes migrant subjects lose those links with their native land.

My primary argument in this project is that, in addition to the strong connections with the homeland that some migrants experience, there exist instances in which an individual disengages from homeland attachments. My analysis aimed to see how these attachments were represented in narratives of migration, how they have changed over time, how they related to identification with the nation, and how they spoke of diasporic subjectivity formation. In doing so, I questioned the prevalent scholarship that sees migrant identities as continually in conflict—located in negotiation stages of hybridity, liminality and in-betweenness resulting from the confrontation with multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environments characteristic of many diaspora enclaves. My work extends from these critical contributions with the intention to show that a migrant position does not always evoke a position of in-betweenness and liminality. In order to show this, I organized my analysis in a chronological fashion to present the different stages of migration—considering authors who represent in their narratives subjects who have recently migrated (Santiago), and individuals who were raised or were born in the United States (Thomas, Pérez, Díaz). This configuration allowed for a display of how homeland detachments are gradually produced and result in what I called *disidentification*—in short, the processes of discontinuity of homeland attachments. In this process, the individuals confront their awareness of the diaspora environment with the homeland’s social and cultural notions that they have or have acquired through heritage education. As part of the acculturation processes, my analysis of disidentification in the previous chapters involved the axes of identity politics, and also examined other cultural manifestations—considering both the characters portrayed and the writers.

In this project I have conceived disidentification as an area of critical exploration that can

be used to reassess migrant subjectivities. The relevance of the insertion of disidentification in the critical debates about Dominican and Puerto Rican migrants in the United States lays in the ways we can rework deep issues of diasporic identity formation, considering in our analyses not what migrants absorb from the host society but what they leave behind. This, I argue, opens our cultural analyses to different critical alternatives through which we can approach migrant identities. By focusing on what is being *detached* from the homeland, we bring to light those cultural, social, political, or personal items that define the nation and that become “unnecessary” for the migrant. Disidentification, however, is not indifference. It helps in separating what is valuable and relevant in the subject’s sensibility frameworks in the diaspora context.

Disidentification creates openness and the ability to readdress social, cultural, and subjective structures giving the migrant individual new perspectives. Re-weighting national items allows the migrant to be more adaptive to the diasporic environment and it also allows us to see the real value behind the sensitive structures that define national identification for an individual. If an individual disidentifies with notions and codes of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, or with cultural manifestations or items brought from (or learned of) the homeland, then: How can we define national identification for a diasporic subject? (I will attend to how this issue is presented in the narratives analyzed at the end of this discussion). For the moment it is important to emphasize the need to readdress our critical attention by focusing on subjects who leave their homeland but also retain and claim national identification. Through the perspective of disidentification in the diaspora we can redefine how identification with one’s nation works beyond the definitions which tie subjects and their homelands together through shared histories, imagined borders, and rootedness. My proposal of disidentification is just that; a proposal for a different way we can approach diaspora subjectivities through a different lens. Further critical analyses of the topic will shed light on the ways diasporic subjectivities spread, reproduce, and

evolve, allowing for a wider understanding of acculturation and national identification processes.

In my analysis of Dominican and Puerto Rican narratives of migration I have carefully considered the inclusion of different circumstances when disidentification can take place. As such, the narratives analyzed in the preceding chapters show how disidentification, as a process, takes place at different degrees and in different circumstances that are influenced by race, ethnicity, and gender. I have also taken into consideration other cultural manifestations as they were voiced as concerns or were addressed by some of these writers. In the first chapter I discussed how disidentification is presented through the development of a gendered national identity in the diaspora through the analysis of Esmeralda Santiago. In the second chapter I presented how these same disidentification processes took place for a second-generation migrant through racial and ethnic conflicts in Piri Thomas. I followed this analysis exploring the conflict of the meaning of a home in the diaspora in chapter two through the discussion of Loida Maritza Pérez. The project is concluded with a reevaluation and rewriting of the nation's history in chapter four with Junot Díaz. Even as these analyses focused on different aspects and stages of disidentification, we can see in all of them the assessment of the homeland in the migrant's sensibility frameworks; the circumstances in which these detachments took place, and how these detachments resulted in breakage of ties with the ancestral land. In this final chapter I will summarize how disidentification processes took place in each of these analyses in order to examine how they work together as an ensemble. This discussion is organized in a thematic structure rather than chapter by chapter. In doing so the narratives are analyzed in context, and allow me to exemplify key ideas that I put forth in the Introduction of this dissertation. First, I will illustrate how the *inquiries* I proposed as the initiating steps of disidentification take place in these narratives by summarizing how they are presented in the texts. Secondly, I will focus on the narratives and how they, collectively, relate to my proposals of them as: 1) affected by the

lack of a shared history with the homeland, 2) rearticulating the concept of home, and 3) located outside of post-coloniality. In the third part I will summarize the key points of my analysis of disidentification through race, ethnicity, and gender. I will conclude this dissertation by discussing briefly how national identification works in diaspora subjects that disidentify as presented in these narratives.

The Introduction of this dissertation explains how I see the processes of disidentification starting in the form of inquiries that develop an examination of the homeland's social and cultural structures. I argued that these examinations originated when notions of the homeland were confronted with the every-day life realities of the diaspora. In my analysis we saw how these inquiries are different for different migrants. On the one hand, first-generation migrants can make direct comparisons between both homeland and hostland because they have had direct experiences in both places. Members of the second-generation migrants rely on what they have experienced in the hostland and what they have learned about the homeland through heritage education and/or on the visits they have made (if they have) to their ancestral lands. These inquiries stem from the need of the subjects to understand their place in the diaspora (either as a new migrant, or a second-generation migrant with an ancestral past). These questions are presented in the narratives not through character representations, but rather they can be induced based on the subjects' reactions to what they value of their homeland and how those values change once in the diaspora. In order to narrow down these inquiries, I presented common threads or focus points of the inquiries that arise in these interactions. They are organized into three groups: 1) the interpretation of the country of origin in terms of development and their place in modernity, 2) the role of homeland's ethical and moral values in terms of their value in the hostland's society, and 3) the perpetuation and place of cultural manifestations or cultural

items transplanted, or learned through heritage education. Throughout my analysis I showed how these inquiries were produced in the four narratives analyzed.

In Esmeralda Santiago's memoir, is when we can clearly see the transition of her perceptions of Puerto Rico and how they change once she migrates to New York. Her cultural inquiries are presented through the representation of food and her understandings of the jíbaro as a national symbol. The jíbaro, representing Puerto Rico, became representative of insular values, while food lead a list of cultural items of which the author constructed a Puerto Rican identity. The cultural references, upon migration, disappeared and the jíbaro values represented in the jíbaro's life philosophy dissolved in favor of an education that would lead Negi to social upward mobility.

On Chapter Two, Piri—a second-generation migrant—acquired his knowledge of Puerto Rico through the filter of his mother, a first-generation migrant. After the heritage education received at home, he realizes that the ethical and moral values transmitted from his mother were not suitable for his surroundings, and he embraces the streets in order to acquire a new set of social codes.

My analysis of Loida Martiza Pérez detailed generational differences between first-generation migrants (including the ones who were raised in the diaspora) and second-generation migrants. In this discussion, the differences in perceptions between the homeland and the hostland for these generations ranged from silence and erasure of the past for the first-generation migrants, idealization of the country from the first-generation who were raised in New York, and a perception of under-development of the ancestral land for second-generation migrants. Additionally, in Iliana's home we saw how cultural items brought from the Dominican Republic in the form of furniture were replaced for "American" furniture presented a cultural performance that stopped the perpetuation of Dominican cultural items. Similarly, Aurelia (Iliana's mother),

recognizing that the values she brought with her from the Dominican Republic were not translatable to the social conditions of the diaspora.

In Junot Díaz we are presented with fukú as a cultural manifestation that was transmitted to the United States. However, the author makes sure to tinge with nuances of the belief in fukú and presents different understandings of it for the same members of the second-generation migrants. As such, as Oscar believed in the curse, Yunior was ambivalent towards it, and Lola did not believe in it. These diverse perspectives aimed to highlight different associations with the cultural past, in which disidentification takes place at different degrees for different diasporic subjects. Fukú also worked as a mean to demarcate the homeland as underdeveloped, as an “un-country” (*Oscar Wao* 128), when the curse was understood as a folktale believed only by members of older generations.

All of these inquiries of the homeland in Santiago, Thomas, Pérez, and Díaz resulted in responses that created a loss of meaning of the ancestral land over time. As I showed in these analyses, moral and ethical values, and cultural manifestations and items, are reinterpreted in order to give room to new experiences in the diaspora. This loss of meaning is what creates a sense of belonging in the diasporic site, creating alliances with the hostland.

In the Introduction, I mentioned that another aspect that influences disidentification with the homeland lies in the way history develops in the two sites of these communities (the nation and the diaspora). I argued that social, economic, and cultural histories for both homeland and diaspora develop independently and rarely intersect. As I posited, this a lack of history continuity exists because the history of these diasporas is usually not inserted in the national history narratives. Conversely, the history of the nation is known for these diasporas, however present every-day life events of the nation are located outside of these diasporas every-day realities. Only three authors make reference to national past events (historical events that can be place in a

specific time of the national past): Santiago, Pérez, and Díaz. Piri Thomas does not present any references about Puerto Rican history, nor does he link the island's present as relevant to his present in the diaspora. These references to the national past can be divided in two groups: those who mentioned the past in their narratives, and those who directly tackle historical events.

The first group is composed of Loida Maritza Pérez who mentions the past during the Trujillato in her novel through the memories of Iliana's parents. However, these events do not affect second-generation or first-generation migrants who grew up in the United States. This lack of interest in history detaches these generations from the national past. Similarly, in her narrative, Pérez does not present the national present as one that goes along with the diaspora because her characters do not display an awareness of the national present.

The second group is composed of authors who tackle history: Esmeralda Santiago and Junot Díaz. These authors tackle the continuity of history from two different perspectives. Santiago's memoir focuses on her life in Puerto Rico and how she reproduces cultural items in her writing. The jíbaro, as one of these cultural items, can be placed in a specific timeframe of the national history—as a subject in the 19th century, and as a symbol of the nation in the 20th century. These cultural references could have been a vehicle to tie diaspora and homeland upon her migration, however, they disappear once she moves to the United States. On the other hand, Díaz's focus on history serves as a vehicle that ties the homeland to the diaspora because of concerns of the characters with understanding their national past. However, the author does not provide references that speak of historical continuity in the present time of the novel; rather they focus solely on the Trujillato.

In my discussion in the Introduction of the treatment of history, I contend that these diasporic narratives produced a historiography that cannot be found in the nation's history, and that this historiography was diasporic and not insular. In other words, the narrations are

concentrated in the subjects' experiences and the tensions produced in the diaspora rather than by incorporating present-time events of the homeland. Through the analysis of disidentification we see how these authors concentrate their narration in the story of the diaspora even as they have an interest in knowing or organizing the nation's past. This exercise has a diasporic function: the homeland's past organization aids in structuring these subjects' present in the diaspora.

Consequently, these narratives collected episodes of the subjects' everyday lives in which national identification played an important role, but only as it was related to the identity conflicts they were experiencing at the moment. None of the narratives discuss the present of their respective homelands, and the ones that do refer to history, only refer to events that marked the beginning of either their migration (Santiago), or the origin of their diasporic community (Díaz). A shared national history continuity follows different paths for the diaspora in these narratives and the instances that promote interest in homeland affairs are diminished. Even when emotional and symbolic meanings of the nation persist, a present-time history awareness of the homeland that speak of an integrative history consciousness is absent, thus creating disidentificatory sensibilities.

Because my proposal of disidentification can be approached from different critical perspectives, I decided to frame my analysis through the development of literary representations of the Puerto Rican and Dominican nations as well as their scholarly interpretations. With this approach I was able to differentiate my analysis from scholars who see different diasporic groups as linked through economic conditions (Darder and Torres 3). I focused on Yossi Shain's assertion that diasporas puts their own spin on their national narrative in order to develop their shared identity (Shain "Role" 118) in terms of narratives produced in diasporic settings. In this part I explained how I perceive the Dominican and Puerto Rican narratives produced in the diaspora as aesthetically reproducing the same thematic tropes of the *home* and the *family* as the

literature of their home countries. I referred to these tropes as responses to the *discourses of the nuclear nation*, which are the national discourses that encompass the metaphor of the nuclear family (home-father-family) to create political agendas. I clarified that by tying Puerto Rican and Dominican diasporas together through literature I did not mean to consolidate a politic of cultural diasporism, but rather my intention was to highlight how these two communities produced texts that reflected similar concerns, and by extension, represented disidentification in a similar fashion. Talking about home (in the domestic sense), is also talking about the nation in these dynamics. The development of these topics of the home and the family evolved in the analyzed narratives, beginning with the conflicts of location at home in Santiago, to moving away from it in Thomas, Pérez, and Díaz. My analyses showed how these moves represented different steps in the process of disidentification with homeland discourses. As a result, the role *home* (as the site of heritage education and national discourses) played different functions in informing identity formation.

The analysis of home began with Santiago and her representations of it in two settings: Puerto Rico and the United States. In both cases the site of home was temporary and transitional because of the family's constant movements in these countries. The physical appearance of her dwellings was presented as broken, reflecting the emotional atmosphere of the household in both countries. Puerto Rico as home, however, was presented as the place that was more conditioned for living even when it shared the same strained economic conditions as New York. It is clear in Santiago's narrative that the representation of home in Puerto Rico as the base for her national identification is tied to her strategy of collecting cultural items to define identity. Both home as a site of unification, and cultural items that connected her to the national home, however, fade when she moved to New York.

Thomas chapter serves as a continuation of Santiago's presentation of home. In Thomas

we saw the transition from being at home and moving away from it, which allows us to see how the concept of home changes. In this chapter heritage education informed the concept of the nation as home, and the home as a reproduction of its discourses. The nation-as-home was presented as idealized through the mother's gaze, turning it (for Piri) into the *mother's land* as opposed to the *motherland*. Most of Thomas' memoir is spent away from the domestic home, as Piri looks for meaning of his race, which in turn makes him reassess his nationality. In this case, home ceases as the repository of racial ancestry through heritage education, and the answers he seeks are away from it, located in the racial link he sees in the other ethnic and racial communities in the diaspora.

My analysis of Loida Maritza Pérez's novel functions as a continuation of Piri Thomas' chapter in the sense that it presents a subject who returns home after embracing the world outside. As a result, we see how Iliana returned home in order to be "embraced." This embrace and call to return signified a return to origins in order to reconnect with the national heritage. However, in this return we have a subject who has acquired a new knowledge (of the outside world/society structures) that she did not have before leaving, which creates a new set of conflicts. As such, Iliana's return home is marked by old and new scars that redefined the concept of home as problematic for the character, and that ended in her leaving home for good.

We saw in Díaz how home, as a dwelling, is barely discussed. Outside of a domestic environment, his characters move freely between the urban landscapes of New York and the Dominican Republic, showing a continuation of Pérez's proposition that home is a state of mind that is not set at a specific location. Díaz's characters identify as Dominican and recognize their heritage land, however, they struggle to fit that within the sensitive frameworks of belonging because of the rejection of society due to their migrant statuses. For Díaz, the concerns for home are presented through the need to understand its history, and history is reassessed to aid in the

formation of diasporic identities.

We witness in all these narratives how these subjects disidentify with *home* as they gradually move away from it. We also see how these diaspora writers rearticulate the discourses of the nuclear nation in order to adapt them to diaspora concerns. If the narratives that represented the discourses of the nuclear nation produced on the islands evolved to challenge normative discourses of the nuclear nation, then these narratives also use the same aesthetics (metaphors of the home/family) in order to form their own interpretations as they relate their own diasporic needs. As such, these writers destabilize the literary representation of the national discourses by deconstructing home and family in order to define diasporic identities.

My focus on the literary figures and aesthetics of these narratives produced in the diaspora stemmed from the representation of cultural affinities that I saw reproduced by these authors. In this reading, I see the treatment of the concepts of family and home dynamics as the thread that links together these Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives. The resulting disidentification from the homeland is what distinguishes these narratives from their homeland counterparts even when they do mirror homeland narrative aesthetics. For this reason I referred to these texts in the Introduction as “diaspora texts” because they are “diaspora-centered” in that they address concerns which are relevant to them as migrant subjects. I also referred to the subjects portrayed as “silent members” (Shain and Barth 452-53) of the diaspora, because of the quality of dealing with issues pertaining to their conditions as migrants, rather than as directly involved in practices that influence political or social change in their homelands. This particularity of being “silent” (not having a political enunciation about issues of the homeland) was present in both the Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives and subjects discussed. Of the narratives analyzed, it is clear that Thomas and Pérez do not intend to discuss issues of the homeland. Díaz and Santiago, however, approach issues in which it can be interpreted at first

that they are addressing homeland political concerns.

As I discussed in my analysis of Díaz's novel, the treatment of history has been understood as a counter hegemonic response to the narrative of Dominican history. However, this treatment of history served as an assessment of the historical diaspora's past that transforms it into myth in order to rend the past as elucidated. In Santiago's narrative, the presence of what can be interpreted as a political enunciation about island concerns is presented through an episode that I did not explore in my analysis but that it is relevant for this discussion. In a chapter titled "The Americanization of Macún," Santiago describes how the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health tried to educate the population of her hometown through safe hygiene practices and healthy eating of American products that were introduced on the island. Even when the townspeople questioned the incorporation of these products to their diet at first, each family welcomes them because of their strained economic conditions. Some critics have understood this episode in Negi's life as a subtext of gastronomic imperialism in the framework of anti-colonial politics (Marshall 50). However, even though *food* played a prevalent role in my analysis of Santiago, I see this episode as highlighting two things. First, the strained economic and class status of Negi's family, which serves as an antecedent justification for the over arching theme of social upward mobility that Negi achieved at the end of the novel. Second, this episode also serves to highlight the nuanced understandings of national identity and acculturation processes that take place in the homeland. My reading of Santiago conforms to this interpretation as using cultural items like food to construct an identity that is questioned for being "in-between" once she moves to the United States.

These two treatments of food and history, even when they seem to be presenting a political enunciation of problems in the homeland, also serve to address these subject's needs in the hostland. For Díaz, it helps situate the past within a context that works for the diaspora, and

for Santiago, it aids her in showcasing that the physical site of a nation is not exempt of hybrid configurations. I argued in the Introduction that I see these Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives as forming a tropological dialogue within their ethnic communities. The lack of political enunciation regarding the homeland of these “silent” members, the attention paid to conflicts relevant to the diaspora, and the narrative representation of the discourses of the nuclear nation to serve migrant identity purposes, position these texts as diaspora texts that assemble a telos of diasporic identity formation.

In my proposal of disidentification in the Introduction I presented the case that diasporic identity formation’s source stem from relations of power and the diasporic subjects’ visualization of being located at the center of power. My analysis has demonstrated such visualization through the lack of resistance to imperial discourses as revealed in the writers’ narration of the subjects in the diaspora. The United States is not questioned by these subjects and, in turn, we have subjects whose portrayals are directed to understand the American social structures rather than confronting them. The most clear example of these power relations lies in Santiago’s memoir in which her desire for social upward mobility seems possible only in the United States and not in Puerto Rico. This is expressed by Negi’s longing for the island, but a lack of desire to return to it because she does not see in it an opportunity to progress. In these subject’s visualizations of power, homeland becomes the Other—the supposed/proposed origin. The lack of interest in returning to the homeland presented in Thomas and Pérez, and the reproduction of American popular culture codes in Díaz, speak clearly of an engagement with the United States social and cultural orders that had generated in them a position of belonging in which political action, subversion, or opposition to power is not present. It is in this sense where I see these narratives as moving away from the neo- or post- colonial readings in which diaspora narratives are sometimes deployed. By being detached from the physical site and history continuum of the

nation and, most importantly, by having subjects visualizing their position within the axes of imperial power, *these* narratives are located beyond homeland borders, away from the anxieties and ambivalences of post-colonial effects.

These narratives present two overarching themes or concern characteristic in all of them when viewed as an ensemble: space and belonging. Aside from the self-evident fact that when discussing transnational communities, we refer to a national space as well as the site occupied by the community abroad, in these narratives *space* was presented in both its physical and figurative forms. As a physical site, the representation of space was concerned with the migrant's place in the diaspora. This representation followed the movements of the individuals as they leave the home, and crossed neighborhoods or cities. As a figurative site, space is related to identity sites: racial spaces, class spaces, etc. The relevance of *space* in these narratives lays in the sense and need for *belonging* that each one of these sites evoked in the subjects. In a host(ile) society characterized by "multis" (multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-racial, etc.), the need to be rightly placed in a specific position, to fit to a specific environment, becomes a matter of importance for these migrant subjects. As a result of the consciousness of spaces, the need for belonging shaped these subjects behavior in these different sites.

As such, we first encountered Santiago moving from rural to urban spaces, from Puerto Rico to New York, and once there, from neighborhood to neighborhood. Negi's last movement was particularly poignant because it required her to shade her accent and ethnicity in order to be able to move to Manhattan to enter the Performing Arts High School. In Thomas we observed from the beginning the demarcation of spaces through the representation of the private and public spheres that the home and the street represented, as well as his move to Long Island. Through Thomas's memoir, we witnessed how Piri relied in what I called *diasporic positioning*—which refers to the different performances he had to adopt in order to be able to

adapt to the different social spaces he inhabited. On the other hand, in Pérez spaces were represented first in the poles of college and home, and then enclosed in the domestic environment in the form of heavily guarded private rooms. Through Iliana we saw how her presence in the house altered the geographies of the home because of the outside knowledge she had acquired while in college, which went against another set of figurative social spaces: the religious and secular. In Díaz spaces were represented in two different ways. First, there were the sites of New Jersey and the Dominican Republic—highlighted through Oscar’s family returns to the homeland. The other space is the position Oscar occupied within his Dominican community in the diaspora, in which he was rejected as “un-Dominican” (11) because of his virginity.

Even as I used the concept of *diasporic positioning* as part of my analysis in Piri Thomas, all the subjects portrayed in these narratives participated by different degrees in these performative acts. These performances originated from their need to be accepted in the different spaces in which they were located. However, with each new identity execution came along a form of disidentification. The clearest examples of this are presented in Santiago and Thomas. As Negi had to shade her Puerto Rican background in order to pass the school interview, Piri battled with his identity as a black Puerto Rican in different settings—identifying as Puerto Rican for other Puerto Ricans, as black for the African-Americans, and as Hispanic for the Irish and Italians. These authors may have not sought to reproduce these dynamics in their narratives, yet their representations are concerned with the multiple forms that identity can take when space consciousness inform the many variables in which subjectivity is affected.

The relationship between spaces and identity, in its figurative form, is presented in my analysis through the multiple discussions in which I explore race, ethnicity, and gender as a marker for disidentification, particularly in Santiago, Thomas, and Pérez.

In Santiago these topics were discussed tangentially through Negi’s perceptions of other

racial and ethnic subjects in her migrant environment and I called attention to the silence of Negi's race and ethnicity in the diaspora considering that her family perceived her as black. My analysis of race in this chapter focused on two fronts. The first front was the representation of the black jíbaro in Puerto Rico, which I concluded worked as a way to re-assigned in the body of the jíbaro a black heritage denied by power. This act could be understood as a political enunciation of homeland discourses, but similar to the other narratives, this served the purpose of Negi appropriating blackness in order to ease social accommodation in the diaspora. The second front dealt with Negi's perspective of Puerto Ricans in school as a divided community that worked as a microcosm of the community at large. The distinction between newly arrived Puerto Ricans and Brooklyn Puerto Ricans disclosed national identifications anxieties within the same national group. At the root, these differences speak of disidentification from the part of Brooklyn Puerto Ricans who saw the newly arrived migrants as inferior.

On chapter two, Thomas's analysis presented the conflictive relationship Piri had with acknowledging his race as he progressively developed a racial consciousness. As he moved between spaces, Piri found himself in a constant process of diasporic positioning denying or adjusting his own racial and ethnic self in order to belong. Piri's search for a better understanding of his racial identity led him to allocate it with struggles of African-Americans at the onset of the Civil Rights Movements. However, in the end, he recognizes that the African-American struggles (and his blackness) stems from a different set of social and historical conditions. Piri relies on *mestizaje* as a way racial resolution. Distancing himself from a Puerto Rican or Caribbean understanding of blackness, the hybrid nature of a diasporan *mestizaje* is suitable for Piri's needs and experience as a Hispanic in New York.

The presentation of race and ethnicity in Pérez served as a way to view how migrants develop different perspectives towards their racial and ethnic selves. Pérez portrayal of the racial

landscape of Iliana's family presented subjects with different color shades and their identification or disidentification with their blackness. This is more clearly presented through Iliana and Marina whose perceptions of blackness oppose each other: Iliana recognizes her black ancestry, while Marina rejects it. Through this dynamic, we discover the legacy of racial erasure that the family's configuration of silence has put into place. The presentation of Santeria as a practice that allocates Dominican blackness in the diaspora through Iliana's mother, works only on the surface, as a gesture whose inheritance arrived too late. As a result, the negation and erasure of blackness permeates in the family, leading some members like Marina to claim a Hispanic identity, dispensing Dominican blackness to the domain of the Other.

Throughout the analyses of these three narratives I have shown how the changes in racial self-perception and identification of these migrant subjects, by way of silence, erasure, or multi-identification, are social adaptations to the racial and ethnic codes of the United States. Disregarding the racial structures of the homeland, however problematic these are in themselves, are strategies of disidentification that lead these subjects to adopt a Hispanic, Latino, or hybrid identity and ease individual and social processes of adaptation.

The presentation of gender as a space of contention was presented prominently in the four narratives analyzed. My decision to incorporate two female and two male authors relied on my intention to see how they presented disidentification through their gender realities. As a result we discover that the representations of the female subjectivities in Santiago and Pérez cannot be removed from the powers exerted by patriarchy, and the representations of the male subjectivities in Thomas and Díaz cannot be detached from the approval and prove of masculinity.

In their narratives, Esmeralda Santiago and Loida Martiza Pérez showed concerns about gender codes by presenting female subjects subordinated to the domestic realm and whose father

figures are confronted, thus making a similar statement about patriarchy. In Santiago, the home in Puerto Rico was governed by the traditional structure of patriarchy that shifted when they moved to New York and the mother took control of the household due to the father's absence. This structural shift in the household originated processes of disidentification with gendered normative structures from the homeland that influenced Negi as a female subject in the diaspora.

The presentation of female subordination in Pérez was framed around religious ideologies brought from the Dominican Republic regulated by Iliana's father. However, the author makes the point of highlighting different positions in regards to these forms of control in her novel. Marina starts the novel in a place of defiance to patriarchal structures whose position was "justified" by her decayed mental state. Conversely, Iliana and her mother Aurelia progressively began to question the father's religion and, by extension, his authority. The breakage with the authoritative structures of machismo in the novel moved gradually from silence, to small transgressions, to insubordination. In the end we saw Aurelia breaking with the patriarchal codes sustained on religious ideologies through her embrace of Santería, and Iliana doing the same through a direct confrontation with the father.

We saw how male subjectivities were tightly linked to masculinity in my discussion of the narratives of Piri Thomas and Junot Díaz. In Thomas there was an urgency to prove and receive approval of his masculinity in his reproduction of the stereotypes of the macho social codes. The male was represented as a subject that needed to be outside of the home in order to grow as a man, while the female characters (represented in Piri's mother) belonged to the domestic environment—and she did not break free from these patriarchal restraints. Piri modeled his masculinity from his father, reproducing through this act the codes of Puerto Rican masculinity. However, we saw how this model does not work in the diaspora setting as Piri embraced the streets. Piri disidentifies with these Puerto Rican masculinity codes assuming both

the American masculinity codes that he copied from popular culture, and the masculinity codes he learned through his access to gang culture. Through his peers in the gang, Piri gets the recognition of masculinity that he craved and the codes of a Puerto Rican masculinity disappear completely when he adopts the violence that comes with gang culture.

My reading of Junot Díaz focused on the treatment of history as it related to national identity formation in the diaspora. A brief discussion of how gender is treated in the novel is relevant to this discussion because it relates to the topic of national identification in disidentification processes that I will address shortly. It is necessary to say that Díaz's novel stands out from the other three narratives in his treatment of gender because it breaks with the traditional codes assigned to both male and female subjectivities. For example, we do not have the presence of the father because Oscar's father abandoned the family at some unidentified point in the narrative. The female migrants, represented by Oscar's mother (Belicia) and his sister (Lola), are from the onset characters who are in a position of agency, outside of the confines of the house, not bound to the rigidities of patriarchy.

This representation contrasts greatly with Thomas representation of female subjects. When viewed chronologically, these narratives create a compelling map of gender subjectivity representations as diasporic writers throughout the past decades have approached them. As a male writer working in the 1960s, Thomas does not tackle female subjectivity issues in his memoir, constraining women to the domestic environment. Meanwhile Santiago and Pérez's works, published in the 1990s, voice their concerns about patriarchy and present alternatives to female subordination. In the 2000s, with Díaz, we have a complete move to agency in which, even when women still struggle with the effects of structures of patriarchy, this is not presented as an impossibility as his female characters' individuality and agency is understood as a given, not as something that they are striving for. In Santiago, Pérez, and Díaz we are confronted with

female characters who leave the home, breaking away from the limitations that *home* (as the foundational site of female subordination) entails. In these four narratives we see similar gender concerns stemming from authors of the same gender, but in these four authors (regardless of gender) we see disidentifying acts that renounce homeland discourses.

One thing that my analysis has shown is that by being located at the heart of power—“becoming” it by reproducing its discourses, “othering” the home nations, and even disidentifying racially, ethnically, or with gender codes—does not mean a full-fledge detachment from the nation. I see disidentification not as a process that in our time is complete (leading to full acculturation) but one that shows the gradual progression of detachments. My analysis of the subjects represented in these narratives showed that even when they disidentify with racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural notions of the islands, they maintain a national identification with their homelands. Disidentification eases acculturation and does not speak of subjectivity fractures, abrupt disruption, or breakage with homeland attachments that speak of split subjectivities and puzzling positions of in-betweenness. In my analysis this is shown in the way in which these subjects disidentify with certain elements, but at the same time keep other attachments intact without these dynamics causing any sign of conflict after they have been reassessed. One of the reasons why I wanted to analyze these two genres (two memoirs and two novels) was that I wanted to explore how disidentification and national identification was represented through two different aesthetics. As a cultural material, I saw in the memoir genre a form whose narrow focus and the understanding that its assertions are factual, allowed for an intimate portrait in which we are closer to authenticity. The imaginative characteristic of fiction is more prone to interpretation due to its creative nature, but it produces significant conclusions about reality. National identification is still present in all four narratives as an intimate and authentic presence, ever haunting and informing these subjects’ realities, even when

disidentification takes place. This presence was represented in the individual efforts these characters and writers made in claiming a national identity (Dominicanness or Puerto Ricanness) at the end of their narratives. As individuals, critics, or national subjects, we cannot fully grasp the personal and sensitive intricacies that bind us to our nations. We can contextualize it through history, devise theoretical concepts that could take us closer to an understanding of these ties' social, cultural, and political ramifications; but, at this point in scholarly history, we can only see it through imagined bonds that tie subjects and our communities together. In these narratives, these abstruse feelings that inform national identification were reified, first by questioning national identification, and then by confirming it, through a national identity, despite disidentification. In the process of disidentification, the characters and narrators I concentrated on have doubted, confronted and question their own ties and nationality. These questions have not been posed directly. Characters did not openly pose the problem: Am I Puerto Rican? Am I Dominican? Yet these questions had been implied. One thing remained permanent however; even as identities and subjectivities flowed and intersected with other identificatory movements or stances, what prevailed in the end is the sense of self-preservation of which nationalistic identification are necessary for subject development. What these readings through the lens of disidentification prove is that the process of dislocation and settlement in a new place severs the personal perceptions of identity and, in understanding this, the person disconnects with previous paradigms and frames of reference. In these dynamics, disidentification aims to present new diasporic identities as representative of the multi-layered nature of a national identity.

The presentation of a national subject construction in the first part of Esmeralda Santiago's memoir speaks of the writer's need of creating a national identity background in order to claim ties that seems lost due to migration. Through the dictionary of cultural symbols the author collected and their reinterpretations in the diaspora, Santiago displayed national

identification understandings that do not take into consideration cultural losses. The mutating character of these symbols presented in the end the possibility of alternative forms of *puertorriqueñidad* created in the context of the United States.

On Chapter Two, in Piri Thomas's memoir, we saw from the onset that the presence of the homeland was recognized as idealized, resulting in a conflict of national identification in the context of the diaspora. Piri's venture out to the streets with the goal to discover the truths behind those idealizations and how they related to his own national identity. The interplay between race, ethnicity, and nationality in Thomas was symbolically represented in Trina, a romantic interest from the island who, I argued, if physically possessed, could harmonize Piri's conflicts. However, when the sexual act does not come to fruition, Piri recognized the layered nature of his identity and defines himself as a hybrid body whose components are no longer in conflict.

My discussion of Pérez's novel presented how the author approached national identification from the interpretation of it as *rootedness*. Using the home as a mock-up of the nation, this author questioned if not being locked in a national site determines one's attachments to it. Leaving home (the nation) at the end of the novel discovers some of its qualities as not easily translatable to the diasporic site, but whose components frame one's identity and follow the subject anywhere.

The most noticeable example of how national identity works in disidentification processes is present in Junot Díaz's novel. It is in this narrative where we confront the subjects who are most disidentified with their homeland because of the level of their acculturation, but who also keep national ties with it. The discussion of national identification in Díaz takes place outside what I discussed in my analysis, but it does relate to my reading of Díaz as rearticulating history through the language of the Genres in order to create a myth for the diaspora. Like any comic, fantasy story, science fiction work, or myth, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

has in Oscar the hero of the story. However, this “hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about—he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with million hots on his jock” (11). The problem with this hero was that everybody questioned his national identity: “You’re not Dominican. And he [Oscar] said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy” (49). From the beginning of the story Oscar’s Dominicanness is negated to him, because he is an overweight, virgin nerd, and he is unable to conquer woman. This characterization was purposely crafted by the author in order to talk about nationality and the nation as evidenced when he recognizes that black people with lack of stereotyped masculinity traits are not usually part of the nation’s self-conception (Danticat 90). *Oscar Wao* can be read as a novel in which a subject is looking for love, and the loss of his virginity will validate his Dominicanness. Presented with Oscar’s journey through masculinity, we are also daunted by the fears of his demise. After all, we know from the title that Oscar’s life is wondrous, but brief. The importance of the link between national identity and masculinity (through the loss of Oscar’s virginity) lies at the end of the novel. In the concluding part, Yunior is reading the last letter Oscar sent to his sister Lola before his death in which he details that he finally had sex with his romantic interest in the Dominican Republic, Ybón. It is significant of Oscar’s prove of his national identity the place in which this confirmation takes place: the homeland. Ending his novel with this confirmation, Díaz is eradicating any doubts of the Dominicanness and the Dominican national identity of subjects in the diaspora. In my analysis of this chapter, I relied on Edouard Glissant’s critical links between history and literature through the realm of myth. As I mentioned, Glissant explains that literature works facilitating the organization of past knowledge and historical consciousness whose achievement derives in myth. To this, Glissant adds that “in myth... the achievement of collective harmony assumes the ritual sacrifice of a hero, [or] at the very least his apparent failure” (72n2). Regardless of the process of

disidentification highlighted in Díaz's novel as taking place in the process of ordering history, Oscar death symbolizes the birth of a Dominican hero for the diaspora: one that validates their national identity and who is born through a multi-layered narrative and history.

My analyses in this dissertation exhibited the representation of subjects who are indistinctly bound by ancestry and heritage, but for who their cultural, social, political, and subjective location in the diaspora is not one that is perpetually in conflict. These authors urge us to abandon traditional conceptualizations of national identification founded on rootedness and ceaseless liminality. The diasporic identity of a Hispanic Caribbean subject does not need to be interpreted as one that is always contending—between here and there—and neither need to be understood as always been displaced or, for that matter, trapped in the social phenomenon of transnationalism. My proposal in this dissertation is that migrant subjects can be approached as localized, with a consciousness of a national past and heritage that may not be necessarily relevant to them.

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