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Strangers at Home: Re/Presenting Intersectional Identities in Contemporary Caribbean Latina Narratives

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

STRANGERS AT HOME: RE/PRESENTING INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES IN
CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN LATINA NARRATIVES

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the
Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2018

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This dissertation is dedicated to Mary Ann Whaley, my grandmother and one of my best friends,
a woman whose strength, compassion, and love know no bounds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not be possible without the unwavering support of my committee members, the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics, my peers, friends, and family. First, I owe a large debt of gratitude to Dr. Delia Poey, who encouraged me to believe in my own voice while providing constructive feedback throughout the entire research and writing process. She has played an invaluable role in making me the scholar that I am and will be. Dr. Peggy Sharpe's compassion, dedication, and knowledge are without limit, and her support has been indispensable throughout my time at Florida State University. Thank you to Dr. José Gomariz, Dr. Jeannine Murray-Román, and Dr. Juan Carlos Galeano for your support, your knowledge regarding Latin American and Caribbean, diasporic, and other theoretical approaches that have been essential to this project, and for helping prepare me to be a researcher in today's field. Professor Virgil Suárez has also provided me with great feedback and his knowledge of the Latinx literary market has had an important role in the development of this dissertation. In addition to helping me prepare for the job market, Dr. Matt Goldmark and Dr. Raquel Albarrán have also helped me conceptualize this project from new perspectives and I am grateful for their insight. In addition, I would like to thank the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics for providing me with the support and resources necessary to carry out this study.

I would also like to thank my parents, sister and brother-in-law, grandmother, Scarlet, my dog, Joshua, and friends for providing constant support throughout my educational career. To my close friends and sisters, Jamie, Carolina, Sadhana, Stephanie, Laura, and Merry Beth, thank you for sharing moments of joy, worry, and sadness. The unconditional love that all of you have shown me has been the greatest motivator, and I hope that I have made you proud.

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ABSTRACT

Understanding and defining nation and identity in diaspora has long characterized the cultural production of Caribbean authors. Notwithstanding, Hispanic Caribbean authors that have emigrated to the United States face this question doubly as they form part of what is labeled the Latino community. While much of the Latino Studies groundwork began in Mexican American or Chicano literary circles, whose cultural background is vastly different from that of the Hispanic Caribbean, authors of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican descent have brought new perspectives to constructions of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation to the broadly named “Latino/a” experience. While much of the early theoretical and literary work was written by men, women writers began to produce prolifically in the late twentieth century. The first voices to be published in mass were primarily those of a privileged existence, coming from families of higher social classes within the Latino community, despite being marginalized within the context of the United States. During the late 1970s to early 1990s, literary production established that being Cuban American, Dominican American, and Puerto Rican in the mainland U.S. meant being light-skinned, heterosexual, and of middle to upper-class economic status. However, during the mid-to-late 1990s and early twenty-first century, new voices came to the forefront to challenge these hegemonic constructions of Caribbean Latina identity that dominated the cultural imaginary and, instead, presented intersectional protagonists who consistently face discrimination based on their gender, sexual orientation, race, and economic class both in and outside of the Latino community. By utilizing diverse strategies of resistance, such as humor, these authors, including Achy Obejas, Jennine Capó-Crucet, Loida Maritza Pérez, Angie Cruz, Giannina Braschi, and Erika López, highlight and satirize the normative aspects of the Hispanic Caribbean diasporic cultural imaginary that marginalizes and/or excludes the voices and

experiences of their characters as being representative of Caribbean Latina identity. In this sense, these authors not only represent a marginalized perspective of identity within the Latino community, but they also re-present, as in presenting anew, a more diverse image of Latina identity in the twenty-first century that departs from the homogenous, normative image of Caribbean Latinas played out in earlier narratives of identity from the early-1990s Latina literary boom.

INTRODUCTION

Re/Presenting Caribbean Latina Identities: Creating a Space for Diverse Voices Through Humor and Performance

The history of the Latin American diaspora in the United States is well-documented, with its roots in the 19th Century, as many prominent figures exiled themselves in burgeoning industrial cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Despite this long history, it is not until the middle to late 20th Century, during the onset of the Civil Rights Movement, that debates around Latin American diasporic identity came to the forefront of both social and academic research. As the question of discrimination against non-Anglos entered the consciousness of American society both politically and culturally, minority communities in the U.S. sought unity through shared beliefs, culture, and experiences, which eventually shaped what is now known as Latino identity. While Chicana/o refers specifically to those whose ancestors have roots in the U.S. states that formerly comprised Mexican territories, the term “Latina/o” is now used to refer to anyone of Latin American heritage,¹ including those of Hispanic Caribbean and Central and South American descent. As Mexican American and Chicana/o activists in the west began to make waves regarding social reform, Puerto Ricans in the east did the same, demanding equal treatment and opportunities. In the 1960s and 1970s, in terms of cultural production, works such as *Y no se lo tragó la tierra...* by Tomás Rivera and works of “teatro campesino” from Luis Valdez highlighted the cultural divisions and societal challenges of Mexican-Americans and Chicanas/os, and Puerto Rican or “Nuyorican” works such as Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* and Nicholasa Mohr’s *Nilda* achieved similar recognition. Despite contributions from Afro-Latina/o writers like Thomas and Mohr, the image of Latinos has been largely white-washed, excluding voices of those with African heritage and reinforcing beliefs regarding racial miscegenation, both in popular culture and literary production. However, this is not limited to

constructions of race, but also sexuality, gender, and economic class as well. The issue of social discrimination and exclusion has largely been examined from the outsider's perspective, that of the Anglo American point of view, but the whitewashing of Latino culture is equally a result of intra-Latino subjectivities and discourses of identity originating in nineteenth-century Latin American nation building social and political projects. However, this project aims to examine social prejudices primarily from the inside, observing the way in which normative Latin American cultural imaginaries transfer to the diaspora and cause intra-Latino conflict and feelings of alienation from within.

An analysis of internal constructions of Latina/o self requires a transnational approach to identity, starting with the country of origin and following the diaspora and its moments of social transition in the United States. Shared cultural imaginaries, inherited from the country of origin, result in imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson affirms, which construct diasporic nations and unify dispersed populations. Diverse historical processes complicate a discussion around homogenous Latina/o identity, and it is important to distinguish different national groups when approaching this subject. To facilitate a clear dialogue regarding gender, race, sexuality, and class, this project focuses on one region, the Caribbean, whose historical experiences and ideologies are similar, as addressed by Antonio Benítez-Rojo and Derek Walcott, among other Caribbean philosophers. As such, this project examines contemporary cultural production from the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora, or the Caribbean Latino² diaspora, in the United States, and how Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican constructions of identity carry over and result in exclusionary practices for those who do not embody normative ideals.

Caribbean Latina authors from the early 1990s like Judith Ortíz Cofer, Cristina García, and Julia Álvarez have made great strides in the debate surrounding gender and their works are

now regarded as part of the U.S. Latina literary and cultural canon. Many Latino Studies scholars have addressed the importance of these narratives in terms of gender and external Anglo to Latino marginalization, but overall the discussion regarding differences of sexual orientation, race, and economic class exists on a surface level and largely reinforce normative Latino social constructs. In the mid to late 1990s, more diverse Caribbean Latina authors came to the forefront, such as Achy Obejas, Erika López, and Loida Maritza Pérez, whose narratives recount experiences of discrimination from both in and outside of the Latino community. From racially, sexually, and economically different backgrounds, their narratives problematize previous notions of Latina/o identity and make space for marginalized voices from within the community.

This project aims to highlight women's voices from within the area of Caribbean Latinx literary production, demonstrating the pivotal role of humor as an agent of revision and presentation of diverse identities. In these narratives, humor, as manifested in speech acts and bodily performance, mocks and thus subverts normative constructions of Caribbean Latina identity. Defining the Caribbean as not only a geographical, but also an ideological region is a pivotal first step. Characterizations of the Caribbean as a repeating island or a shattered vase, from Benítez-Rojo and Walcott, respectively, are useful here as they describe a region that is united in terms of historical processes of colonization, slavery, and political intervention, but dispersed geographically as island chains. Stuart Hall's description of Caribbeanness³ as a way of being is also essential as this foments how diasporic Caribbean identities are conceived in the United States. In addition to postcolonial theory to understand the ideology of a Caribbean diaspora along with its migration to the U.S., socio-historical information about the many philosophical waves that have impacted this region is also essential. These studies, such as Linden Lewis' *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean* and Consuelo López

Springfield's *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*, contextualize gender, race, sexuality, and economic difference in the contemporary Caribbean as components of a larger Pan-Caribbean identity that reflects the phenomenon of fragmented unity as theorized by Hall, Walcott, and Benítez-Rojo.

Humor, in this study, serves as both a defense mechanism and platform for highlighting conflict within the Latina/o community. Humor, as Sean Zwagerman summarizes in *Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy* from 2010, is both a means of criticism and survival for those who exist on the margins in a space of constant unknowns.⁴ Diaspora is, at its core, an unpredictable space, as one culture clashes with another and struggles to adapt and survive. Although there is no one accepted definition or theory of humor, Zwagerman does underscore the importance of context in order for humor to succeed as a tool of subversion. Without the appropriate audience, humor falls flat, and does not have a transgressive effect; Zwagerman refers to this phenomenon as the "total speech situation" (6). The humor utilized by the writers in this study depends on an audience that is aware of Hispanic Caribbean or, at the very least, North American cultural codes regarding gender, race, sexuality, and class. Knowledge of early discourses surrounding national and regional identity in Latin America is essential to dialogue with and humorize intra-Latino subjectivities. However, given the academic and market classification of these narratives as multi-ethnic American or Latinx literature, it can be assumed that the target audience belongs primarily to one of these groups. Historically, humor is theorized as a method to confront and oppose social and political change in a non-violent manner. For women, as Regina Barreca asserts, comedy is a way to criticize and problematize the dominant ideology in which they find themselves.⁵ An example of characteristically Caribbean humor, and Cuban in particular, is *choteo*, a form of humor

theorized by Jorge Mañach. *Choteo*, effectively, served as a means of destabilizing elitist Cuban ideals and exclusionary practices that treated Afro-Cubans, poor Cubans, and those with less ties to Europe as barbaric and uncivilized.⁶ Inspired by Dianna Niebylski's *Humoring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Latin American Women's Fiction* from 2004, my project takes a similar approach by analyzing the role of different styles of humor and categorization of humorous bodies in contemporary Caribbean Latina narrative as social transgressions and revisions of identity. However, whereas Niebylski's study focuses primarily on gender, my study examines the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality in the Caribbean Latino community. Intersectionality, a phenomenon posited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, addresses the multiple levels of discrimination experienced by African American women in the United States. My project extends the definition of intersectionality to include Latina women, and locates it within the Latino community itself. Intersectional Latina feminism is epitomized in Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, whose approach to intersectional identity as a third space proves fundamental to this project. Nira Yuval-Davis' *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* also theorizes intersectionality in terms of nationalist discourse, and how diverse expressions of gender, race, sexuality and class contribute or go against constructions of national identity.

In terms of Latina/o Studies and gender specifically, Ellen McCracken's *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* from 1999 and Juanita Heredia's *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-first Century: The Politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations* from 2009 serve as a foundation for approaching contemporary Latina identity in literature. McCracken's study addresses the role of polyphonic narration as a means to providing unity and collective Latina identity throughout literary production in the twentieth-century.

Collective narration has been a focus for many scholars who also approach gender in terms of matrilineal legacy, which is characteristic of many early Caribbean Latina novels, including *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Álvarez, and others. Rather than the collective voice, Heredia's project turns away from the collective and focuses on decolonizing efforts by Latina authors, in terms of race and gender, and takes a transnational, individualized approach to identity. In addition to analysis of Mexican and Peruvian authors in the U.S., Heredia addresses Afro-Latina identity in narrative by Marta Moreno Vega and Angie Cruz. Still, neither McCracken nor Heredia address the intersection of gender and race with sexuality or sexual orientation, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding this sector of the Caribbean Latina diaspora. My study takes this lack into account and addresses the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class from a transnational perspective that facilitates an intra-Latina/o observation of identity.

My first chapter defines the Caribbean as a region that is unified by not only geography, but also a shared cultural imaginary and history. In addition to providing relevant historical context regarding the Caribbean diaspora in the United States, it also establishes the philosophical groundwork for a study of this group theorized by diaspora studies. I refer to the Caribbean Latino population as a diaspora of a diaspora, given that the Caribbean population is almost entirely made up of individuals of European, African, and the Asian descent after the extinction of nearly all indigenous Caribbean people.

The second chapter, "Confounding Cuban American Exceptionalism: Humor as Resistance and Revision in Narrative by Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* and Jennine Capó Crucet's *How to Leave Hialeah*," compares coming-of-age narratives from two different contemporary Cuban American women writers. Coming from geographically diverse regions,

Obejas is from Chicago and Capó Cruet from the suburb Hialeah, northwest of Miami, each writer utilizes humor as a way to broach socially divisive and controversial topics within the Cuban American community. Each author acknowledges the myth of Cuban exceptionalism that characterizes the 1950s exodus and utilizes humor to speak against the normative ideals that it promoted and reinforced among Cubans and the dominant Anglo American context. *Choteo*, recognized as a characteristically Cuban and/or Caribbean form of humor, provides a space in which these authors can resist elitist principles regarding gender, sexuality, race, and class.

The third chapter, “Bodies of Resistance: Representations of Dominican American Identity in *Geographies of Home* by Loida Maritza Pérez and *Soledad* by Angie Cruz,” argues that the body becomes a vehicle of humor and revision in two contemporary Dominican American coming-of-age novels. Living in a context where their voices are marginalized by patriarchal figures, Susan Bordo’s characterization of bodily gestures as resistance become the format in which the protagonists of each narrative demonstrate rejection, transgression, and thus criticism of normative constructions of identity. What is more, as women of African descent, their racialized experience alludes to a legacy of violence against black bodies in the Americas. Their bodies, historically representative of the master’s tools, as Audre Lorde has summarized, become inert sites of action, torpid and ill, rendering themselves useless as vehicles to reinforce normative identity politics and thus transgressing them. Instead of *choteo*, these writers employ bodily performance as humor that mocks elite, normative values from within the Dominican diasporic community implicitly rather than explicitly.

My fourth chapter is titled, “Radical Voices of Difference: U.S. Puerto Rican Women, Humor, and Excess in Erika López’s *Flaming Iguanas* and Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!*” A culmination of theoretical approaches utilized in the second and third chapters, this chapter

bridges bodily performance and *choteo* style verbal humor found in two contemporary Puerto Rican coming-of-age narratives. Protagonized by women of sexual excess, these works confront hegemonic constructions of Puerto Rican identity regarding gender, sexuality, race, and class, including the trope of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*. Their in-your-face humor and descriptions of bodily excess question notions of appropriateness and what is considered literary, serving as a metaphor for identity.

The coming-of-age narrative, usually serving a pedagogical purpose, reinforces normative ideologies and thus constructions of identity. Each of these Caribbean Latina coming-of-age narratives utilizes humor to problematize these ideals and present intersectional identities that are otherwise relegated to the margins of Latina/o imaginary and mass cultural production. This project argues that these narratives embody Cuban sociologist Ricardo Ortíz's idea of "confoundational fiction," as works that confound the dominant foundations of Latina/o identity and instead present, represent, and re-present Latina identity as diverse.

The goal of this study is to underscore the subversive nature of verbal humor and humorous bodily performance of Caribbean Latina authors as their work re-writes and resists dominant and normative constructions of Latina/o/x being. Taking issue with hegemonic ideologies from within the Latino community along with Anglo American belief systems that are imposed upon Latinas/os, this study provides an intra-Latino approach to resistance and conflict and demands a transnational and diasporic approach to contestations of Latina/o identity in the United States. These works reflect Anzaldúa's idea of "new mestiza consciousness" and reconsider that to represent a "new Latina consciousness" that encapsulates Afro-Latinidad as well as non-binary gender, sexual, and linguistic expression.

CHAPTER 1

SITUATING THE HISPANIC CARIBBEAN DIASPORA WITHIN THE REALM OF LATINA/O STUDIES

A repeating island, a shattered vase, and an imagined community: these are just some of the more salient characterizations of the Caribbean region. Not defined by geography, but rather by a shared (neo)colonial history and experience, the Caribbean is an area of exploration and exploitation whose citizens grapple with questions of identity and nationalism daily. As a contextual grounding for this study, this chapter provides relevant historical and philosophical framework for discussing the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora in the United States. Although the Caribbean region includes many linguistic and cultural communities, this study centers itself on cultural production from Spanish-speaking Caribbean territories: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Their shared experience as Spanish colonies that extinguished a native population in the name of Christianity, exploited the labor of African slaves, fought for independence from the crown in the late nineteenth-century, some obtaining it and some not, and later as North American occupied nations has resulted in a shared cultural imaginary that unites these nations despite geographical borders. Caribbean cultural constructions of gender, race, and sexuality are intrinsically linked with social and economic class, as is the case with most Western civilizations, and these ideologies continue throughout the diaspora in the United States. However, as the diaspora achieves more temporal distance from the Caribbean region and incorporates itself more into Anglo-dominated North American society, cultural codes, gender, race, and sexual constructs begin to evolve and reflect new formations of identity and self.

In addition to Caribbean context, this chapter will also present how the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora fits into Latina/o Studies, as well as relevant terminology and philosophical

ideas regarding the Latina/o community. Although Latina/o Studies encompasses groups and individuals from all of Latin America, this study focuses only on the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora, and therefore utilizes the term Caribbean Latina/o to distinguish from those of Mexican, Central American, and/or South American heritage. Still, the characterizations of an overarching “Latina/o experience” by Mexican American and Chicana/o writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga prove indispensable to this study, as their ideas provide the groundwork for the growing field of Latina/o Studies.

This chapter will first introduce diaspora theory and relevant ideas on postcoloniality, later narrowing in on the Caribbean region. It will then introduce historical context regarding the Hispanic Caribbean, focusing primarily on the diaspora to the United States and the processes that fomented this, followed by a description of the Latina/o experience and the characterizations thereof. Lastly, this chapter will open up to the following three chapters by introducing social constructs of gender, race, and sexuality within the context of the Hispanic Caribbean and Caribbean Latina/o identity.

The Caribbean is a geographical and cultural region that is characterized by the diaspora of several different national and ethnic groups. Dispersed between North and South America in the Caribbean Sea, it is geographically tied to both continents while also standing apart from them for its own unique cultural syncretism that results from a shared (post)colonial history. The historical and social processes that have impacted the Caribbean are similar to those that have occurred in the rest of the Americas, but on a much larger scale, given the relatively small amount of physical territory that each Caribbean nation possesses. Diaspora is an inevitable part of Caribbean identity, as it is home to migrants from nearly every continent. While this study

focuses geographically on three Caribbean nations, the idea of “Caribbean-ness” utilized here is primarily cultural and ideological rather than a phenomenon resulting from geography.

Diaspora, in the general sense, described by William Safran and, later synthesized by James Clifford, is the relocation of a community of people who share a common national origin (“1991” 83-84; “Diasporas” 305). Within the boundary of diaspora, according to Clifford, one finds terminology related to specific forms of movement of human populations, such as exile and immigrant, among others. Citing Khachig Tölölian’s 1991 article, “The Nation State and its Others: In Lieu of a Preface,” Clifford remarks that diaspora is often utilized to describe experiences of “immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, [and] ethnic community” (303). Each term has specific political and geographical implications, which allows some to be used concurrently, such as refugee and exile, while others are remarkably different, like guest-worker and exile.

In his article, “Exile,” Martin Baumann compares exile to diaspora, noting key differences and similarities. For Baumann, “diaspora” originates etymologically in the fifth century, coming from the words *dia-* and *-speirein*, which refer to a separation and dispersal (20). However, Baumann focuses on the religious connotations of diaspora, showing that it was historically used to refer to the dispersal of Jewish people who, without a sovereign territory, were in a perpetual state of diaspora. The word “exile,” he indicates, did not gain popularity until the twentieth century, when large numbers of Jewish families fled Nazi Germany (22). Baumann notes that their motivation for leaving was related to the oppressive politics of Nazi Germany, or what he, citing Krohn and Sheppard, describes as the “political religion” of National Socialism (23). His use of the word “diaspora” is tied to religion, meaning a dispersal of people of a particular faith, while “exile” is not religious and, instead, political. Although the emigration of

Jews from Germany in the 1930s and 1940s is inherently religious, Baumann reminds us that it is due primarily to political oppression. This designation of exile as a phenomenon of political oppression is essential when discussing the Hispanic Caribbean migration to the United States.

In addition to Clifford, Safran, and Baumann, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* and *Nation and Narration* have proven indispensable to this study and postcolonial theory in general. *The Location of Culture* describes the experience of living in diaspora as existing in a third or liminal space, referring to the feeling of being in-between two spaces, which parallels Anzaldúa's characterization of the Mexican-U.S. border and description of *intersticios*, or interstices, as an uncomfortably comfortable location for Latina identity. Bhabha's earlier work, *Nation and Narration* argues the importance of literature in the formation of a cultural imaginary, which is linked to Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation as an "imagined community" of individuals with a shared cultural code. With regard to the Hispanic Caribbean, Ricardo Ortíz, in *Cultural Erotics in Cuban America*, discusses the concept of foundational fiction (28), citing Doris Sommer, which argues that foundational fictions, such as the *bildungsroman* and/or the coming-of-age narrative, reinforce accepted national values and mores. In his article, Clifford remarks that the nation's imagined community can be disrupted by "discontinuities and equivocations springing from minority and diasporic temporalities" (Clifford 317), which go against hegemonic principles of the homeland. This problematization leads one back to Ortíz and his idea of "confoundational" fictions (28) that confuse the cultural moral obligations of foundational fictions.

With its complex history of migration and multiple colonizations, it is no surprise that many postcolonial theorists have origins in the Caribbean. The different waves of migration have led to multiple theories on Caribbean culture as a hybrid entity. Hybridity, transculturation,

creolization and *creolité*, and transnationalism are all terms that have been utilized to describe Caribbean processes of cultural formation. James Clifford and Nestor García Canclini introduce hybridity and hybrid cultures, which have been both celebrated and criticized, for their synthesis of the Latin American experience but also the homogenization of the same, respectively. Both García Canclini and Clifford gain inspiration from a canonical Caribbean work that deals with hybridity, published in 1947 by Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, theorized the phenomenon “transculturation” in his collection of essays. He alludes to the ethnic and cultural mixture of Cubans by utilizing the metaphor of *ajiaco*, the popular national dish, to describe the population and its ethnic composition, which is comprised of ingredients from various geographic regions. Each ingredient retains its own unique character, while harmoniously coexisting with the other ingredients. Transculturation contrasts with the theory of acculturation which assumes that all cultures blend into one, best characterized by the melting pot metaphor popularized in the United States. In describing transculturation, the coexistence of different cultures, Ortíz remarks that “there was no more important human factor in the evolution of Cuba than these continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations” (101). Ortíz celebrates the diversity of Cuba’s population, composed by centuries of diasporas from Europe and Africa, and sees it as a strength, rather than a weakness, as it was viewed at this time in other Latin American countries that promoted miscegenation or *mestizaje/mulataje* in order to whiten and Europeanize the population.

Decades later, in 1993, Paul Gilroy would explore transculturation again and examine the diverse African diaspora in the Americas in *The Black Atlantic*. His work re-examines fundamental Afro-Caribbean texts and, according to Clifford, hypothesizes that African diasporic culture “cannot be reduced to any national or ethnically based tradition” (316) because of its

history of constant movement and blending. Not long after Gilroy, García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, published in 1995, describes the transcultural, diasporic, and hybrid nature of Caribbean, and all Latin American identities while simultaneously expressing concern for the authenticity of that identity as it enters a global economy. Canclini recognizes the acculturating effects of the global market on other countries, and asks whether Latin America can withstand this and retain its unique hybrid cultural identity. However, as Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel points out in *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context* from 2014, the Caribbean region proves challenging for any over-arching postcolonial study of Latin America. She proposes instead an isolated examination of these territories (some of which remain without complete sovereignty), as characteristic of "extended colonialism" (6), or the term that she uses to describe the complex sociopolitical status of many Caribbean and archipelagic nations, including the Philippines.

In addition to this terminology related to hybridity and diaspora, Benedict Anderson and Stuart Hall's work on the cultural imaginary and nationalism is also invaluable to this investigation, as I will be examining the role of contemporary Latina narratives in supporting and disrupting diasporic nationalisms. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* from 1983, Anderson introduces the phenomenon "cultural imaginary," which is a shared, intangible realm of reference in which cultural norms are stored. He believes that the nation is comprised of an imagined political community, in which people who have never met and live in different geographical locations can still belong to the same nation due to their shared imaginary.⁷ Traditions, gastronomy, language, religious beliefs, and other cultural markers make up the cultural imaginary. Stuart Hall expands on Anderson's work, also examining Edward Said's concept of imaginative geography and history, to focus on the

Caribbean. He notes the importance of Africa and African cultural inheritance in the shared cultural imaginary of Caribbean people.⁸ Hall also discusses identity formation, again citing Anderson to say that identities are distinguished “by the style in which they are imagined” (402). This is to say, then, that literature and the arts play an important role in constructing cultural identities of a particular community by recognizing and narrating differences in individuals and their histories. Although Hall speaks in particular about the Afro-Caribbean community, his ideas can be extended to the Caribbean Latina/o and/or Afro-Latina/o diaspora residing in the United States as well.

In addition to hybridity and theories of nationalism, Clifford also touches on gender in diaspora. He affirms that “diasporic experiences are always gendered” (313), despite the fact that most theoretical approaches tend to generalize diaspora for all genders. He refers to Janet Wolff, who remarks that in studies of displacement and travel, focus is typically on a male experience. Clifford states that women typically reinforce patriarchal values of the homeland through “kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions” (313). Women tend to hold tighter to cultural traditions in their style of speech, dress, and food, reinforcing the national cultural imaginary in future generations. He also states that women’s diaspora can be doubly problematic, as they “are caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures” (314). However, Clifford also mentions the potential for changing gender roles as more and more women migrate alone and become economically and socially independent. Women’s experiences in diaspora have the potential to reveal new gender roles and subvert patriarchal values as they become less dependent on men. In this sense, then, the diasporic community for women becomes “a site of both support and oppression” (314), which at times reinforces the gender roles that relegate them to inferior status, while at other times providing support from other women who

may be in similar positions or already on the path to independence. The role of gender in diaspora will prove important to this investigation, as this project analyzes narratives written by women authors of Hispanic Caribbean heritage in the United States.

The Caribbean, as mentioned previously, is a zone of contact for many different cultures, which has led to theories of hybridity, transculturation, and diaspora as described previously. Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls this hybrid phenomenon a “supersyncretism” (12), amplifying the notion of syncretism that takes place in other Latin American nations due to the heavily concentrated level on which it occurs in the Caribbean. It is this encounter of vastly different cultures, namely European, African, and Southeast Asian, that bonds the Caribbean region, according to Benítez-Rojo, and distinguishes it from the rest of Latin America. Several contemporaries of Benítez-Rojo have utilized metaphors of small parts of a whole to describe the Caribbean and its collection of island nations that are ideologically united, despite linguistic or political differences. In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, published in 1996, Benítez-Rojo introduces the metaphor of the “repeating island” to describe the Caribbean, showing that the islands are reproductions of one another as a result of the plantation system and slavery. The plantation system, which he refers to as “the machine of machines”(6), is a concept that he borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in the formation of a Caribbean identity and imaginary. The repetition of this machine throughout the Caribbean along with supersyncretism results in the persistent Chaos and unique culture that defines the region. However, for Benítez-Rojo, Chaos is not a negative descriptor: he capitalizes the “C” in order to distinguish it from other connotations of chaos as destruction. Benítez-Rojo uses Chaos in the scientific sense, alluding to the fact that there is order in disorder (*Repeating*

Island, epilogue 2). In other words, the repeating chaos of Caribbean culture is, ironically, what both defines, stabilizes, and unites the region.

Similar to the idea of the repeating island, which focuses primarily on Cuba, Saint Lucian writer Derek Walcott offers the metaphor of the “shattered vase” to characterize the Caribbean region. In his essay from 1992, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” Walcott notes that the “gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles” (69), alluding to the many fragments of their African, Asian, and European diasporic identities. This process of recovery of broken pieces resembles the Chaos of “The Repeating Island.” However, Walcott alludes to the residual pain and suffering that results from the Middle Passage, similar to Edouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* and Stuart Hall’s work, giving weight to the Afro-Caribbean experience. The memory that was subsequently deleted from the national historical narrative, and thus robbed of descendants of slaves who entered the Caribbean during the colonial period, requires that the past, as painful as the process may be, be constructed by those living in the present via archives and familial histories. Recovery of the shattered vase, or fragments of memory, is best achieved, for both Walcott and Glissant, through the act of creating. The lasting effects of the plantation system and systemic racism that resulted from the colonial period in the region carries over into the Caribbean Latina/o diaspora in the United States as it forms an essential part of the Caribbean cultural imaginary. Writing and creating, then, becomes a way in which to reconcile these embedded racial binaries, and can also be extended to other social factors such as gender, sexuality, and language; writing, in essence, becomes an effort to rewrite and validate history of the Other.

The legacy of the Caribbean past can not only be attributed to its European colonizers and the slave trade, but also a more contemporary neocolonization of the region by its neighbor

to the north, the United States, as Martínez-San Miguel affirms.⁹ Since the end of the 19th century, the United States has had some level of involvement in Caribbean government and culture. After defeating Spain in the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898, the United States gained control of both Puerto Rico and Cuba, along with other Spanish colonies in the Pacific Ocean. Although Cuba became a politically independent nation a few years later, it was still overseen by the United States for many decades, and Puerto Rico remains a territory of the United States to this day, with a history of changing classifications that ultimately resulted in the establishment of a Free Associated State in 1917. On the island of Hispaniola, the United States has intervened in the governments of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in Haiti in the mid-twentieth century. Despite having obtained their independence much earlier than Cuba, these nations were still not immune to the influence of the United States. In addition, the U.S. has involved itself in Granada and other non-Hispanophone Caribbean territories for political reasons during the past century. While the presence of the U.S. is oftentimes surrounded by conflict, its cultural imprint as a land of economic opportunity and political refuge on the collective imaginary of Caribbeans has inspired a series of migrations to cities like Miami, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. The diaspora that characterizes the Caribbean can then be described as two-fold: the movement of people coming from Europe, Africa, and Asia, and the movement of people from the Caribbean elsewhere, resulting in a diaspora of a diaspora.

The Hispanic Caribbean diaspora in the United States can be traced back to the late 19th century, with many pro-independence Cubans exiling themselves in New York and Tampa just before the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898. What began as the Cuban War of Independence eventually culminated in U.S. intervention and a shift to a battle between Spain

and the Americas. As tensions began to rise, many Cubans exiled themselves, awaiting their nation's political and economic independence from Spain. Exile proved to be an arduous process filled with waiting, nostalgia, and questioning of identity as a Cuban, as observed in the poetry of José Martí. The desire for political change while being outside of the homeland is a well-documented characteristic of the exile community, as Baumann asserts,¹⁰ but perhaps best synthesized in the work of Martí. He, along with José María Heredia, produced several poems and essays while living in the United States and questioned concepts such as identity and nation as Cubans in diaspora. These authors show a great preoccupation for the well-being of the nation of origin, even while at a distance.

At the end of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, the Treaty of Paris of 1898 granted possession of Cuba, Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico to the United States. While Cuba achieved its formal independence from the U.S. in 1902, Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico remained as territories. Along with the initial community of Cuban exiles that established themselves in Ybor City/Tampa, Miami, and New York, Puerto Ricans became one of the largest Hispanic Caribbean diasporic groups in the United States. Puerto Rico passed through a series of different territorial statuses with the U.S. in a political era that was characterized as solving the Puerto Rican Problem,¹¹ in which the U.S. government tried to figure out how to best incorporate the territory into the national project. Finally, in 1917, with the suspension of the Foraker Act and subsequent passage of the Jones Act, all Puerto Ricans became citizens of the United States. Many Puerto Ricans relocated to New York and other large urban areas in the hopes of finding economic and educational opportunities for their families. This wave of migration caused a shift in the meaning behind the Puerto Rican Problem, which was then “confined to conflicts surrounding migration - a social problem that could readily be blamed on the migrants

themselves” (Thomas 141). Unlike their Cuban and Dominican counterparts who had to apply for a visa, Puerto Ricans were able to travel with relative ease between the mainland and the island, leading to Luis Rafael Sánchez's 1990s description of this movement as *la guagua aérea*, or flying bus (12), which characterized a the movement of lower to middle class Puerto Ricans. What is more, many Puerto Ricans came to the mainland U.S. after the commencement and subsequent failure of “Operation Bootstrap” in the late 1940s, which gave subsidies to large corporations who relocated to the island. However, despite having U.S. citizenship, many Puerto Ricans struggled to find equal access to jobs and wages, and were relegated to the poorest sections of the New York boroughs, surrounded by diverse immigrant groups. As a result, many Puerto Ricans felt as though they were third class citizens, not receiving the full benefit of being an “American” for which so many other immigrants long. Back on the island, the arrival of U.S. officials brought about questions of epistemic and sexual violence, in which the cultural customs of Puerto Ricans were disregarded and replaced by Anglo American values and women were sterilized involuntarily in order to control racially and ethnically favorable population growth.¹² This particular moment in history plays out in many Puerto Rican women’s narratives, especially those who belonged to the *guagua aérea*, showing the effects on their family in terms of food, language, and the disruption of pedagogical systems.

While neocolonial forces were overtaking the Puerto Rican nation, large waves of Cuban immigrants made their way to the U.S., particularly to Miami, as the Cuban Revolution, led by Fidel Castro, began to take shape during the 1950s. These were often wealthy families who benefitted from economic ties with the U.S. and had high levels of education, such as business owners, doctors, and lawyers. María de los Ángeles Torres, in her book, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States*, refers to this early migration as the “Golden Exiles”

(37) because they were seen as the exception, the desired immigrants from Latin America who made preferred economic contributions, assimilated to Anglo American values quickly, and, perhaps most importantly, were light-skinned and resembled the Anglo idealization of race more than their Mexican and Central American counterparts. After the Communist Revolution succeeded in 1959, many of these exiles hoped and believed that the Revolution would eventually fall and that they would be able to return to their homeland. Baumann's affirmation that exile stems from political oppression is certainly true for these "golden" Cuban exiles in the 1950s and early 1960s, who escaped the onset of the Castro regime. Torres adds to this definition, noting "the impossibility of return" and the importance of memory, which "becomes a central force in creating diasporic identity" (37), best manifested in the creation of nostalgic zones of pre-1959 Cuban culture like the Little Havana neighborhood in Miami. The longing of return to a pre-Revolutionary Cuba is a frequent preoccupation of Cuban American cultural production, but it is not without its pitfalls, as it often idealizes a Europeanized image of Cuban identity.

Concurrent to the rise of the Cuban Revolution, the Dominican Republic found itself under the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, an authoritarian leader who ran on a platform of race politics that villainized neighboring Haitians and resuscitated tensions from the early nineteenth-century regarding the Haitian annexation of the Dominican Republic.¹³ Trujillo gained popularity as a voice against North American imperialism following the U.S. occupation of the island nation from 1916 to 1922, eventually winning the presidency in 1930. In power for nearly 20 years, Trujillo's dictatorship came to a halt with an assassination by rebel forces and a subsequent occupation by the U.S. military in 1961. Paired with the influence of Anglo American values, Trujillo's philosophy of racial superiority¹⁴ persisted even after his death, in

which Haitians are black and Dominicans are white, forming an inseparable part of Dominican identity and resulting what Ginetta Candelario has characterized as a triangular relationship between the U.S., Dominican Republic, and Haiti. The oppressive Trujillo dictatorship caused many Dominicans to seek refuge in the U.S., despite the grueling process to obtain a visa, as Trujillo limited emigration. As for those who emigrated before 1961, in *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature*, Danny Méndez affirms that little is known about this group in terms of cultural production (18). During the brutal Trujillo regime, those who could afford to emigrate legally via air or water did, resulting in a similar migratory phenomenon as that which occurred with the Cuban exodus to the U.S., in which wealthy families relocated and lower-class Dominicans were left on the island (Torres-Saillant 34). After the death of Trujillo, Dominicans began to migrate by any [financial] means possible, taking to homemade boats like their Cuban counterparts and heading north. After 1961, the Dominican American community grew to more than 300,000 in the 1960s and 1970s,¹⁵ and continued to grow steadily throughout the rest of the twentieth-century, favoring metropolitan areas like New York City, particularly Washington Heights and the Bronx, and Miami.

With Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican diasporic communities already well established in the United States by the early 1980s, movement of these groups to the U.S. mainland was steady and relatively manageable. However, as the political, economic, and social situation of Cuba worsened, the second half of the twentieth-century was characterized by more desperate forms of emigration from the island. As more and more people left, Castro decreed that anyone who wished to leave the island could do so on April 15th, 1980, at the Port of Mariel. Referred to as *escoria* (Torres 109), or scum, Castro baptized those who left from Mariel as undesirables of the Revolution. The Mariel exodus resulted in a political and humanitarian crisis

in the U.S., unable to handle such a mass amount of refugees coming to its shores.¹⁶ As opposed to the “Golden Exiles” of the 1950s and 60s, these *marielitos*, as they were called, were more diverse in nature, including those of varying racial composition, economic class, and sexual orientation. Whereas the Golden Exiles were readily accepted due to their economic potential, European phenotype, and heteronormative behavior, *marielitos* were seen as a threat to Anglo American and hegemonic Cuban American ideals, resulting in a negative representation by the press.¹⁷ A large exodus, amassing over 100,000 Cubans in the period of six months, Castro closed the Port of Mariel in October of 1980, problematizing future emigration from the island. Given the close proximity of the Florida Keys, located only ninety miles from the Cuban coast, an escape seemed attainable, and those without the luxury of owning a boat or being able to purchase a boat ticket were left with few options. This led to a series of people attempting to leave the island by any means possible throughout the 1980s and beyond. Most visible were the improvised rafts made out of tires and other floatable materials, leading to their nickname *balseros*, or rafters, stemming from the Spanish word for raft, *balsa*. For the rest of the 20th century, more and more *balseros* continued to arrive in small numbers with the shared goal of economic opportunity and political and social liberty.

Despite cultural similarities, the process of immigrating is often reflected in their cultural production as well. While Puerto Ricans have United States citizenship and can travel relatively easily between the island and the mainland, Dominicans and Cubans do not. Cubans, in many cases, are exiles, and typically lose their Cuban citizenship soon after emigrating and, in effect, becoming stateless, despite typically receiving U.S. residency after one year and one day. Dominicans, lacking both citizenship and refugee status, do not have the same treatment. The most common method for Dominicans that migrate to the U.S. is to arrive with a tourist visa and,

if financially or otherwise unable to begin the legal process of establishing U.S. residency, overstay the visa. This differing treatment for each group contributes to an intra-Latino hierarchy of subjectivities that frequently places Cubans at the top, while Puerto Ricans, despite having citizenship, and Dominicans are seen as less-than. As Lorrin Thomas points out, Puerto Ricans often question the validity of their citizenship due to their poor treatment by the Anglo-dominated American political arena. After the Jones Act of 1917, Puerto Ricans and U.S. officials alike were unsure of what to do with this new group:

They were foreigners with U.S. citizenship, immigrant-citizens but not Americans. Unlike other immigrant groups that would become known as "hyphenated Americans" over time - Italian-American, Japanese-American - Puerto Ricans in the United States were never referred to as Puerto Rican-Americans. Their relationship to the United States was spelled out awkwardly, instead, in phrases like "American citizens of Puerto Rican origin," and observers occasionally, using an imprecise shorthand, referred to them as "Puerto Rican citizens." For most of the twentieth century, though, this was an impossible category, suggesting quietly the unresolvable tension between its two terms: *Puerto Rican* and *citizen* fit together only when mediated by the United States. (Thomas 3)

While Puerto Ricans struggle with the idea of having citizenship in a country that does not treat them justly, Cuban cultural production is marked by feelings of loss and nostalgia for a country that no longer exists. Issues of memory, attempting to reconstruct a country that only exists in past experiences and the legacies of others, are often central to Cuban works of literature and art, as María de los Ángeles Torres suggests. She describes that "the idea of exile is the thread that holds together the political memory of the community...[it] becomes a central force in creating a diasporic identity...re-creation of memory of what was left behind" (Torres 37). The influence of

historical memory is common in Dominican cultural production as well, and frequently include incidences with its neighbor to the west, Haiti. Danny Méndez notes that Dominican works can be characterized by an affective relationship with Haiti and the use of emotional creolization (7), terminology that he borrows from Edouard Glissant, meaning that Dominican racial identity is always constructed against that of Haitians. Racial descriptions, both implicitly and explicitly stated in cultural production, are always linked to Haiti and its antagonistic role in the Trujillo rhetoric. By examining these deeply rooted social and historical components of identity both in the U.S. and in the country of origin, this provides the foundation for a discussion on hemispheric Hispanic American intersectionality, as opposed to a U.S.-based construction of *Latinidad* and intersectional identity.

Although communities of Hispanic Caribbean individuals maintain a long history in the U.S. dating back to the late nineteenth-century, the majority of foundational Latina/o Studies theoretical texts come about during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Fusco 164) and focus on Mexican Americans and Chicanos, the most populous and visible Hispanic American communities in the United States at that time. As African Americans began to organize and march for abolition of Jim Crow laws and segregation in the southeast, Mexican Americans, and in particular migrant farm workers, also saw this as a moment to speak out against mistreatment and social segregation. This also gave way to the Chicana/o movement, in which individuals with roots in the southwest predating the conclusion of the Mexican American War in 1848 reclaimed their indigenous heritage and thus rights to the land as descendants of Aztecs, utilizing the word *Chicano/Xicano*, derived from the nahuatl term *Mexica* used to describe those living in the Valley of Mexico, who resided there long before those of Anglo descent. In academia, at this time, scholars from and interested in the U.S.-based Hispanic American population began to

articulate what it meant to be *Latino* or *Latina*, relating the experience of brownness with blackness as factors of marginalization. Most recently, Francés Aparicio and Alberto Sandoval, in their seminal essay from 2005, “Hibridismos culturales: La literatura y la cultura de los Latinos en los Estados Unidos,” provide the most useful definition of Latina/o for this investigation. They describe a Latina/o as being an individual of Latin American heritage residing in the U.S., and whose condition as a racial minority has impacted their life experiences (665). While Latino/a is an all encompassing term to describe the entire Latin American diasporic population in the U.S., it has been used historically and in academia to largely refer to individuals of Hispanic American heritage, excluding those from French and Portuguese speaking nations in the Americas although these regions, too, fall under the linguistic and geographic signifier of Latin America. Until recently, the term also was often used interchangeably or as a placeholder for Mexican Americans, due to the misunderstood and less-visible presence of those of Hispanic Caribbean descent. As Coco Fusco points out in *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (1995), the confusion and interchangeability of the terms Hispanic and Latino has led to homogenization of the population, eliminating differences of race, class, and gender.¹⁸ Although the historical experiences of Mexican and Central Americans are vastly different from those of the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora, much of the terminology and theory generated during these initial inquiries into the meaning of diasporic, immigrant or exile, and Latino identity prove useful to this investigation.

Early Latino cultural and theoretical texts were largely written by and about men, reflecting the relative silence of Latina voices both in cultural and scholarly production. Still, the presence of women both in the community and in cultural production as subordinate to men reflects the patriarchal and conservative beliefs from the homeland regarding gender. Women

were relegated to roles as mothers, lovers, and domestic servants, and always in service of men and the nation. As Lorrin Thomas notes, within the Puerto Rican community in New York, “women’s participation in public life was more willingly recognized by *colonia* leaders when it stayed within the traditional boundaries of women’s roles” (33). However, as time passed and women became exposed to the progressive urban culture and conveniences of the modern U.S. metropolis, men began to worry about the purity of their “*virgencitas de Hispano América*” (33). These patriarchal ideals that stem from the colonial period, in both their discriminatory treatment and preoccupation with a woman’s purity, are not unique to the Puerto Rican diaspora, but rather can be observed in all Latin American and Latino communities. In her semi-autobiographical work from 1987, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the challenges of being a Hispanic American woman in living between two vastly different cultures, revealing the now infamous *virgen/puta* dichotomy that characterizes Hispanic American women as being either saintly or not, with little room for grey area. Refuting this dichotomy and the subordination of women, she calls on Latinas to develop a new *mestiza* consciousness, in which one learns to tolerate the ambiguity of identity and challenge the discourses that attempt to decrease her cultural value. She writes:

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it. (103)

Anzaldúa engages both U.S. Anglo-dominated culture with that of Mexico, whose normative visions of identity exclude her for several reasons. She calls on women in similar positions to tell their stories and, thus, challenge the rhetoric of the patriarchy and its influence on cultural imaginary. As such, the concept of new mestiza consciousness can be applied to Hispanic Caribbean women of non-binary gender and sexual expressions and, instead of indigenous, African heritage, who have long been absent from Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican hegemonic constructions of identity. In terms of the Hispanic Caribbean, many of the forces that shaped beliefs surrounding gender and identity are similar across the different territories, despite being vastly different from those in continental Hispanic America.

Along the lines of a new mestiza consciousness, Juan Flores and George Yudice speak of a “new social movement” in Latino cultural production in their 1990 article, “Living Borders / Buscando America: Languages of Latino Self-Formation.” As Flores and Yudice discuss, written narratives and other forms of cultural expression bring issues of the private sphere, such as gender, into the public sphere, making a space for criticism. They remark that Latino Studies must depart from the generic discussion on social and economic class and examine issues like “race, gender, environment, religion, and so on...which play out their demands on the terrains of the body, sexuality, language, etc.” (58). Flores and Yudice recognize that the analysis of class struggle alone camouflages other components of identity and, quite literally, white-washes issues of intersectionality. In terms of the shifting canon, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez discuss the evolution of Latina/o literature and activism after the Civil Rights era in their work, *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (2007), touching on the shift in priorities from simply social class to race, gender, and other points of contention. Similarly, Juanita Heredia’s work, *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century: The*

Politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations (2009), speaks to the dangers of “homogenizing ‘a Latin American experience’” (9), and calls on an approach to Latina/o Studies that includes a discussion on gender, race, sexuality, and how they intersect with class. This depends on a dialogue with both U.S. culture as well as that of Latin America, and how these components of identity manifest themselves in the historical memory of each community.

Socio-cultural beliefs that belong to the cultural and national imaginary of the Hispanic Caribbean region have carried over to its diaspora in the U.S., and normative constructions of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican identity have certainly been passed down from one generation of immigrants and exiles in the U.S. to the next. Patriarchal gender roles relegated women to subordinate positions and, as a result, there are fewer women writers present in the Latin American and Latino literary canon. However, toward the end of the twentieth century, corresponding with the feminist movement both in the U.S. and Latin America, more and more women began telling their stories and grating against traditional views of a woman’s place in the Western world. In *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*, Ellen McCracken notes that previous Latino works from male authors “viewed women’s experiences from the outside, leaving a number of political and cultural issues to be developed from the various perspectives of the new Latina narrativists” (4). Paralleling the surge of women writers in the Latin American literary Post-boom of the 1970s and 80s, many Latinas, like Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, began publishing narrative, poetry, and other cultural texts that raised questions about cultural and national imaginaries which limited their value within the community.

In order to reconcile identity in diaspora, many Latina writers of the late 1980s and early 1990s turned to maternal or matrilineal narratives for their emphasis on recovering lost or untold histories related to the homeland.¹⁹ This idea is traced back to Virginia Woolf, who states that

women “think back through our mothers” (Yu 19). Woolf’s ideas privilege mothers as the curators of identity and, by extension, the national imaginary, as they transmit cultural beliefs from one generation to the next. Matrilineal or maternal narrative has been a popular writing strategy for several diasporic communities in the U.S., not only the Latinos, but also those with African and Asian roots, showing a longing to preserve culture from the homeland while at a distance. Many scholars have examined the role of mothers in Latina narratives, such as Julee Tate and Antonia Domínguez Miguela, often coming to this conclusion that mothers symbolize the homeland and are gatekeepers of cultural identity. The polyphonic narrative that gives voice to different generations of women, shows the implicit exchange of culture from grandmothers to mothers to daughters, and thus the continuity of the culture and nation through their roles as both women and mothers.²⁰ Similar to the coming-of-age narrative, the matrilineal narrative has taken on a foundational role in establishing Latina identity and providing a link to marginalized and/or minority cultures of the United States. Many of the now-iconic Latina matrilineal narratives from this time period, such as Judith Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990), Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1991), and Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992), recall the experience of immigration from the perspective of multiple women’s voices from one single family. Each generation of woman represents new challenges as they cope with diasporic identity, like gender roles and sexuality, racial discrimination, and bilingualism. However, these narratives largely voice a privileged position, relative to the Hispanic American context, as women whose families immigrate legally, come from wealthy families already influenced by North American culture, and are racialized as white. Although they make great strides with respect to gender, they do not reflect the experience

of those who experience discrimination both within and without the Latino community due to their race, sexual orientation, or use of language.

This project argues that voices of Caribbean Latina women of non-normative racial, sexual, linguistic, and other social identifications are presenting or re-presenting an intersectional image of Latina identity as opposed to one that is dominated by the nostalgia of European heritage, heteronormative behavior, and bourgeois ideals. These narratives of new representation stem from a need to break with the tradition of homogenization of Latina identity, to which Ellen McCracken, Laura Halperin, and other scholars allude. As McCracken writes, “[w]ide differences persist in preferred language; customs; cultural practices; economic levels; political attitudes; religious beliefs; sexual preferences, national, ethnic, and racial backgrounds; buying habits; and media consumption” (6). This is certainly true for not only the U.S.-based Latino community, but also Latin America, where identity has continuously been contested.²¹ By examining social and historical forces that shape identity both in Latin America and in the U.S., this project engages historical memory with current formations of diasporic nationalism and belonging. In particular, this project takes into account intra-Latino subjectivities that oppress members from within, which gives more weight to the term intersectional, as they are not only women belonging to a minority group within the U.S., but also exist as minorities within that minority group for not contributing to the hegemonic Latino discourse on identity. Halperin also discusses to intra-Latino subjectivities with attention to physical and psychological violence,²² as her project also addresses intersectional Latina identities. Intersectionality, a term extrapolated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to “the ways that structural dimensions of racism, patriarchy, and other forms of domination constitute complex patterns of disadvantage and power” (228). This is to say that these categories, although able to be analyzed independently of each other, are

mutually constituted through power relations and their influences intersect to form complex identities. Latina women that identify on the margins of their own community, then, are triple minorities due to their marginalization as women, Latina, and, in this investigation, race, sexual orientation, and class, or all three.

In particular, this project examines diverse manifestations of humor as a vehicle for resisting normative constructions of identity from within the Latino community. To this end, contemporary intersectional Caribbean Latina authors, which is to say those that publish post-1995 and whose themes contrast with those of the early 1990s boom, not only speak to the prejudice present within their community via cultural production, but also offer criticism and revision of these norms. As McCracken argues, women writers from this time period present a gendered approach to ethnicity and “work not only in opposition to dominant U.S. cultures but also often contest the patriarchal blind spots of the Latino cultural ‘renaissance’ of the late 1960s and beyond” (179). Instead, the authors and works analyzed in this investigation grate against the matrilineal, collective narrative of the early 1990s and instead give voice to diverse manifestations of Latina identity. Each chapter will focus on the humorous dialogue regarding gender as it intersects with sexuality, race, and class, in each narrative, to demonstrate how Latina writers are making a space for diverse representations of contemporary identity. To enter into a discussion about humor, Sean Zwagerman’s *Wits end: Women’s Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy* (2010) provides relevant framework for observing the role of women’s humor in American literature. Zwagerman’s work traces the foundations of North American women’s humor as theorized by Constance Rourke, Dorothy Parker, and others. In particular, Rourke’s belief that humor serves as an outlet for other repressed emotions among women is useful to this investigation.²³ Latina women, and in particular Caribbean Latina women, who

write against and satirize tropes of identity express a frustration with hegemonic expectations and imaginaries that relegate them to the margins of society. From a Latin American and, specifically, Caribbean perspective, Jorge Mañach's characterization of *choteo*, or Cuban satire that humorizes daily, rudimentary aspects of Cuban life and culture is essential to this project. Mañach's work allows this investigation to maintain a hemispheric approach not only to identity, but also humor, which has as diverse manifestations as identity from one region to the next. Along with Mañach, Dianna Niebylski's *Humoring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Latin American Women's Fiction* (2004) contributes to the study of humor in women's writing from a Latin American perspective. In her study, Niebylski dialogues with *choteo* and *guachafita*, another form of characteristically Latin American humor, as well as the female body as a performative site of humor. Her study not only provides relevant terminology pertinent to this project, but also a diverse analysis of humor as not only a dialogic phenomenon, but also one that takes manifests itself via the body. Each of these studies, both in American and Latin American studies, provide important framework to situate this project in the field of both U.S.-based Latina/o and Latin American studies.

The historical and theoretical context in this chapter is useful for understanding the implicit background of the narratives discussed in the subsequent chapters. Although each chapter will touch on historical and social implications of gender, race, sexuality, and other phenomena present in the narrative, the more detailed tracing of Hispanic Caribbean and Caribbean Latina/o historical processes here allows for a more focused analysis of each narrative work in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2

CONFOUNDING CUBAN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM: HUMOR AS RESISTANCE AND REVISION IN ACHY OBEJAS' *MEMORY MAMBO* AND JENNINE CAPÓ CRUCET'S *HOW TO LEAVE HIALEAH*

**“I am as marked by genetics and exile as everyone else, as comfortably a part of any family portrait as the others. But though nobody much notices, I’m also a stranger in my own family, whether my connection is by blood or experience”
(Obejas 79)**

For diasporic nations, constant movement and feelings of displacement become a fact of life. Stability is a luxury, and questioning one’s national and individual identity becomes common place. Political, geographical, and ideological boundaries and borders are contested sites, despite an ever globalizing and interconnected world. In the case of Cubans in the United States, the Straits of Florida have become a site of pain and loss, similar to the *herida abierta*, or open wound, as Gloria Anzaldúa has characterized the Mexico-United States border, where “the third world grates against the first and bleeds” (25). Hundreds of thousands of people have risked their lives in the hopes of reaching Florida, seeking both political and social freedom and economic opportunity. Florida, New York, and many other large cities have become home to Cuban exiles, where a diasporic culture has developed, and a diasporic Cuban American nation has taken shape. Language and other cultural signifiers persist in the shared historical memory of these communities, bringing pre-Revolution Cuban culture to the U.S., especially in cities like Miami and Tampa. However, despite a shared sense of dislocation and nostalgia for a country to which they cannot return, not all members of Cuban America are treated equally. Cuban social and cultural hierarchies persist and are reinforced through language, music, visual art, and, of course, literature. For the Cuban diaspora in the United States, patriarchal and hegemonic forces with regard to gender and race dominate the cultural landscape, valorizing light-skinned women

who take on domestic roles and are subordinate to men. The ideal woman is virtuous, innocent, and saintly, embodies the Virgin Mary,²⁴ and serves as a symbol of the entire nation as one cohesive, godly, upright and white unit. She is also sensual, but only within the bounds of marriage, as she must maintain her family's honor. Heteronormative practices expect her to marry young and reproduce in a biological sense, as a mother to children, and in a cultural sense, by passing these values down from one generation of Cuban children to the next. As with most of the Hispanic Caribbean, the ideal woman is also white, or racialized as white, valuing European lineage and marginalizing women of obvious African descent. The ideal woman is also from an advantageous economic class, or marries into one, and does not choose a partner with skin that is darker than hers to whiten her family's bloodline. As María de los Ángeles Torres has pointed out, the majority of Cuban exiles that came over before and immediately following the 1959 revolution were of a higher social class, were light-skinned, did not resemble other Hispanics in the U.S., and were eager to assimilate and disassociate themselves from the Castro regime. This led to the shared belief that Cubans were exceptional, somehow different than other Hispanics, and allowed Cubans some privilege in the U.S. political and economic scene. However, this legend of Cuban exceptionalism has also elevated tensions within the U.S. Latino community, as it is believed that Cubans receive advantageous treatment.

Cuban men in exile have been writing since the late 1800s in the United States. Their experiences, preoccupations, political aspirations, and nostalgic visions of home have long characterized the Cuban American literary canon. Woman, on the other hand, has largely been absent in Cuban American cultural production from its beginnings until the late 1980s and early 1990s, which saw a rise in women writing fictionalized and autobiographical accounts of migration, diaspora, and reconciling *cubanidad* in the States. Writers like Cristina García and

Dolores Prida gained literary notoriety, questioning constructions of gender and identity from within the Cuban American community. However, these works largely reinforced gender binaries and left out voices of Afro-Cuban women and those from lower economic classes that did not constitute a large portion of the 1950s and 60s emigration. As years passed, and as many *marielitas*, who were demographically more diverse, and second-generation exiles reached maturity in the mid-1990s, a new generation of women writers fervently challenged these same constructions of identity, underlining intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and economic class from within *and* without the Cuban American community. No longer taking social norms at face value, contemporary women writers sought to deconstruct the tropes of identity that alienated women of African descent, diverse sexual backgrounds, and less visible economic classes. It is through humor, particularly dialogic humor, that the Cuban American protagonists disrupt the very foundations of Cuban American identity that would otherwise marginalize them for not striving to be docile, white or white-seeking, heterosexual, bourgeois women.

Two narratives that underscore the growing presence of intra-Cuban American intersectional voices and the use of humor are the novel *Memory Mambo*, written by Achy Obejas and published in 1996, and the short story collection *How to Leave Hialeah* by Jennine Capó Crucet, published in 2009. Each literary work challenges the circa 1959 ideology surrounding Cuban women and Cuban exceptionalism, and, in so doing, disrupting the very foundations of a Cuban American identity and diasporic nation in the United States. While previous studies have touched on the role of historical memory and identity in *Memory Mambo* and other works by Obejas, such as Amrita Das' 2005 dissertation, little has been said about the presence of race and racial stereotypes present in the novel that are both explicitly and implicitly expressed. In addition to Das, Francés Aparicio's 2009 article about intra-Latino conflict in

Latina/o narratives briefly addresses the idea of a Cuban race as perceived in *Memory Mambo*, but only in comparison to Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who are viewed as generally being darker-skinned by Cubans. Regarding Capó Crucet and her work, little to no scholarly work has been published regarding her collection. Whether this is due to its recent appearance on the literary scene (*How to Leave Hialeah*, her first widely-published work, is only eight years old to date) or its resistance to the label of Miami Cuban literature,²⁵ Capó Crucet prefers to specify that she is from Hialeah, there is currently a gap in scholarship about her work. Despite the geographical proximity of Miami and Hialeah and a shared Cuban ethnic inheritance, these cultural zones are quite different in terms of socio-economic class and racial demographics. Transnational and intersectional studies have become increasingly popular and useful to discuss identity like those in Obejas and Capó Crucet's work, as demonstrated by Ruthellen Josselson and Michele Harway's collection *Navigating Multiple Identities: Race, Gender, Culture, Nationality, and Roles* from 2012, which addresses the effects of migration on adolescents and those belonging to diasporic and minority groups as they struggle to find place in a nation that is not their own and, even more complex, in a community that does not accept them fully (Josselson 3-4). For differing reasons, both Obejas and Capó Crucet give voice to marginalized sectors within the Cuban American community. Their works problematize the mythical foundation of Cuban American identity and, instead, present a diverse image of a diasporic nation through humor and satire.

In addition, both of these narratives present Cuban American identities in motion: in *Memory Mambo*, young Juani Casas traces her steps (and those of her family) to reconstruct her identity, dancing through the family's shared memories, while the short story "How to Leave Hialeah" provides step-by-step instructions in second-person narration for a woman to escape

Hialeah, both physically and ideologically. Marked by movement and heightened sense of self-awareness as intersectional women, these narratives feature protagonists whose comical assertions rupture with the construct of the homogeneous, “exceptional” community that established itself in the U.S. before and immediately after the Cuban Revolution. The discourse surrounding Cuban American identity that came out of the immediate pre and post-Communist Revolution reflects conservative Catholic, white, middle to upper class, heterosexual values, leaving those who identify otherwise, like the protagonists in these works, in the margins. By utilizing sarcasm and humor to criticize this limiting rhetoric of identity, the narratives that I will analyze here challenge beliefs regarding race and racial superiority, sexuality and sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and gender normative practices and traditions that are reinforced through a shared historical memory. Obejas’ and Capó Crucet’s satirization decolonizes the mainstream Cuban American cultural imaginary. In so doing, *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah* embody Ricardo Ortiz’s idea of “confoundational fiction,” which serves to problematize hegemonic constructs of nation and identity that are perpetuated in literary cultural production and, in particular, foundational fictions like the coming-of-age novel and the fable. Laura Mulvey’s “languages of humor” and Dianna Niebylski’s *Humoring Resistance* from 2004, regarding the languages of humor specifically within the context of Western Civilization and Latin American women’s literature, provides the theoretical grounding necessary to examine how *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah* deconstruct the rhetoric of Cuban American homogeneity and exceptionalism that persisted for several decades in literature. Moreover, they are indicative of the “new social movement” approach to Latina/o identity as proposed by Flores and Yudice, by publicizing and demonstrating awareness of issues typically relegated to the private sphere, such as gender, race, and sexuality. By privileging

intersectional narrators who exist on the margins of the Cuban American society for a variety of reasons, a new, diverse image of the Cuban American woman presents itself.

In order to enter the discussion of gender and sexual politics in Cuba, and how this has carried over to the U.S. diaspora, I use Smith and Padula's 1996 study, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, which provides a historiography of pre and post-Revolutionary sexual norms in Cuba, along with Elizabeth Dore and Carrie Hamilton's more recent *Envisioning Cuba: Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* from 2012, which details post-Revolution sexual practices and women's changing role in society. However, these works are limited to the island nation itself, and necessitate an examination into Cuban diaspora politics as well. In order to historicize Cubans in the U.S., María de los Ángeles Torres' 1999 socio-historical study, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* provides a detailed demographical and historical analysis of each wave of Cuban migration to the States. Many of the tropes that have come to define the Cuban American community are detailed in Torres' work, including the frequently used nickname "Golden Exiles," whose migration founded the Cuban exceptionalism stereotype. However, Torres' work leaves room for further examination of gender and sexual practices, which is where Susana Peña's *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami* from 2013 provides useful historical and social context. Her study examines sexual norms in post-1980 Miami, and although it primarily focuses on gay men, it does briefly examine the ways in which lesbians have also been marginalized in the Miami Cuban community. While there are many recent articles and books that focus on the homosexual Cuban population, there is a lack of scholarly research regarding Cuban and Cuban American lesbians. Therefore, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, although focused on Chicana identity, provides useful context regarding Latina and minority lesbians in general. Along with

these texts regarding Cuban and Cuban American social practices and histories, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Anzaldúa's views on intersectionality will be the backbone to the discussion of the ways in which these socially constructed facets of identity serve to alienate certain members of the Cuban American nation while simultaneously challenging its perceived homogenous and pro-European composition that has its roots in colonial era race and gender politics. In that sense, postcolonial and diaspora theory from Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Gopinath, Benedict Anderson, among others, are necessary to discuss the Cuban exile nation in the U.S., and show how these narratives disrupt and re/present it through their chosen language and style of narration.

Gender in Cuba has been an ever-changing social construction since the colonial era and throughout the twentieth century. The strict regulations regarding women's behavior that were set forth by the Catholic Church have seen a series of ebbs and tides throughout Cuban history, sometimes waning in their moral influence. After the Cuban War of Independence in 1898 or Spanish and Cuban American War, as it is more commonly known, Cuban women became more influenced by Anglo culture of the United States, and experienced a brief period of sexually liberal behavior (Smith and Padula 32). However, with the onset of the Communist Revolution in the 1950s, gender roles became again more rigid and limiting for women. Despite rhetoric of equality, the leaders of the Revolution were raised with and subscribed to the strict gender norms of the white, social elites in Cuba, as described by Mirta de la Torre Mulhare in her doctoral thesis and later synthesized by Carrie Hamilton. She notes that the prerevolutionary period saw the emphasis of colonial beliefs and practices among social elites, such as "(1) machismo as the essence of maleness, associated with politics, the military, cultural activities, or sex, and the belief that men are by nature non-monogamous, unfaithful and untrustworthy; (2) the high valuation placed on the family; (3) a rigid social hierarchy; and (4) the cult of virginity"

(Hamilton 25). These values continued throughout and after the Revolution, relegating white women subordinate to their husbands and fathers, and women of color to an even more inferior social status. Juanita Heredia points out in her study from 2009, *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century*, contemporary Latina authors “allude to a legacy of colonial history, explicitly and implicitly, in a transnational context” (3). As such, the struggles of gender, sexuality, and race that Latina writers describe in these narratives, then, is anything but fiction, as these forces shape their everyday lives and ideas of cultural identity.

After the Revolutionary victory of 1959, women’s role in Cuban society resembled that of the colonial period. After the triumph of Castro’s regime, he “created the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) to harness the political enthusiasm, talents, and energy of Cuban women for the revolution” (Smith and Padula 32). This meant placing women in jobs that would not harm their reproductive capabilities, such as science and manufacturing, but rather protect their delicate bodies and reinforce their maternal nature, such as education and nursing. Movements for gender equality were seen as frivolous, and feminism was “a bourgeois indulgence and an imperialist tool to divert women from the more important class struggle by tricking them into rejecting men” (4). The Revolution sought out women to be producers of future revolutionaries, mothers of the Revolution and its principles, without questioning its beliefs. Ideas about *la patria*, or state, were also utilized to reinforce gender binaries, as Hilbourne Watson indicates in “The Globalization of the Discourse on Gender and Its Impact on the Caribbean”:

The revolution preserved patriarchal traditions inside nationalist themes about fatherland (state) and motherland (nation): both of these symbolic elements of national parentage are gender constructs that reinforce nationalism, populism, and patriarchy with destabilizing effects on feminine gender (80)

As more and more Cuban women and their families relocated to the U.S. before and after the Revolution, these values regarding gender continued in diaspora via a shared historical memory, as evidenced by their appearance in literature and other forms of Cuban American cultural production. Even in exile, patriarchal and “white-only” racial ideals dominated the exile and migrant nationalist movement, which in turn constructed the image of Cuban American identity that exists today (Mirabal 369). Women were relegated to the margins of society, often silenced, as political and economic forces both in Cuba and in the U.S. were controlled by men. These shared gender and racial ideals thus formed part of the diasporic national discourse and, in so doing, established the imagined Cuban American community in places like Miami. The largest concentration of post-1959 Cuban exiles in the U.S. and largely populated by political conservatives that are staunchly anti-Castro, Miami became the nucleus for what has constituted Cuban American identity. As of the late twentieth century to early twenty-first century, the rhetoric of identity is evolving to include more intersectional voices within the Cuban American community. Increasingly more members of the one-and-a-half²⁶ and subsequent generations of Cuban Americans are writing against the cultural imaginary that comes out of Miami and the era of “Golden Exiles.” Culturally situated in an interstice between Cuba and the U.S., and with the authority of distance and time, their in-betweenness allows them to both participate and assess contradictions and problems at the core of the conservative Cuban belief system.

Despite being geographically located in the U.S., it is through shared memories and the structure of a diasporic nation or community that Latina/o/x writers are culturally and historically engaged with Latin America.²⁷ This includes, of course, beliefs regarding gender, race, and other hierarchies of identity that are passed down from generation to generation. Before the publication of *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah*, Dolores Prida’s theater piece, “Coser y cantar,”

from 1981, underscores the experience of a woman physically and emotionally torn between two cultures (Cuba and the U.S., English and Spanish, etc.) by utilizing the characters “ella” and “she” as symbolic of this rupture. Prida’s work also comments on gender and gender expectations in the U.S. and Cuba, and what constitutes appropriate behavior for women in both places. Like “Coser y cantar,” Cristina García’s novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, published in 1992, also questions gender constructions and inherited memory. It traces the lives of three generations of Cuban and Cuban American women in a polyphonic narrative style, showing the interconnectedness of maternal relationships that reproduce constructions of identity and gender in future generations despite emigration from Cuba. As Ignacio Rodeño points out in his article about García’s novel, the second-generation Cuban American daughter, Pilar, who narrates portions of the work, problematizes the idea of community and creates an identity outside of the bounds of Cuban hegemony (2-5), representing a shift in the direction of intersectional narrators. However, differing from *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah*, Pilar’s grievances with Cuban American identity are more politically related, and she does not focus on issues of sexual orientation and race. Pilar’s rebellion represents a juxtaposition for this investigation, which seeks to demonstrate similar transgressions of normative Cuban American identity from second-generation authors, specifically Obejas and Capó Crucet, who address intersections of gender, race and sexuality more explicitly and profoundly.

Both *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah* feature diverse characters whose existence and experiences grate against mainstream, Miami-based Cuban American constructions of identity. They are women of mixed racial backgrounds, lower economic class, and sexual proclivities that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate, resulting in an intersectional identity within the Cuban American community. The narrators of each work

question, at times satirize, and ultimately problematize Cuban and Cuban American cultural norms that would attempt to dictate their identity. By highlighting and humorizing the interconnectedness of the socio-cultural factors in question, these narratives present a diverse image of Cuban American identity and deconstruct previous notions of homogeneity and exceptionalism. These narratives challenge the trope of women as mothers and reproducers, both in the biological and ideological sense, disrupting what Karl Marx calls “social reproduction” and choosing instead to present a new, more faithful version of Cuban American identity for the twenty-first century.

This chapter provides a summary of each narrative as relevant to the overall analysis, along with a discussion of gender and sexuality in the text, both referring to appropriate sexual behavior and sexual orientation. This leads into a conversation regarding race and racial beliefs, demonstrating how gender and sexual norms intersect with racial ideals within the Cuban American cultural imaginary. It will also be necessary to briefly underscore how other national groups within the Latino community view and comment on the Cuban “race” as well, frequently strengthening the notion of exceptionalism. Lastly, the topic of race transitions smoothly into an examination of how gender, sexuality, and race are direct indicators of perceived Cuban American social and/or economic class. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to underline the “confoundational” qualities of each narrative as presented through humor and how they depart from the mainstream constructions of identity in the U.S. Cuban diaspora.

Memory Mambo tells the story of a middle-class Cuban American family living and working in Chicago in the 1990s. The narrator is Juani Casas, a twenty-four-year-old woman who works at her family’s laundromat and openly identifies as a lesbian. The story focuses on her journey to reconstruct the past and, particularly, a fateful night that resulted in her break-up

with a significant other. While attempting to recuperate the past, she alludes to gender and class hierarchies within her family and community: women who are complacent with unfaithful and violent men and who create or prolong family myths regarding racial lineage and economic status. In general, there is a lack of understanding among her family about Juani's sexuality. As she recalls her romantic and familial experiences, Juani reveals some of the obvious temporal and thematic conflicts in her family's memory and identity. In private, but also in discussions with her cousins of a similar age, Juani "questions these myths, although she knows that these invented fictions have become, in fact, the stuff of historical memory" ("Cultural Twins" 634). Beliefs about her family's European racial lineage and her father's sexual appropriateness, which her family has adopted as historical fact, are called into question and humored throughout Juani's journey. Commenting on migratory sexualities in Cuban American cultural production, Katherine Sugg also analyzes the role of memory and trauma in *Memory Mambo* and Juani's attempts to overcome its falsities. Sugg remarks that Juani's "preoccupation in the novel with these often negative aspects of collective memory reflects the way nationalist imaginaries work in such constructions of 'the Cuban'" (476). In *Memory Mambo*, and in Juani's family, it is clear that "the Cuban" is white, heterosexual, and that women are meant to marry, have children, and submit to their husbands. In addition to its engagement with an intra-Cuban discussion of identity and nation, *Memory Mambo* also addresses the complexities of intra-Latino relationships, where Juani interacts with other women of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent. This highlights outside stereotypes regarding Cuban American identity, perceived class and, especially, the myth of Cuban exceptionalism. Juani, through her use of sarcasm and humor, along with the privilege of first-person perspective, destabilizes the dominant, normative belief

system that her family and the Cuban American community share with regard to gender, sexuality, and race.

As the protagonist, wielding narrative authority and upsetting the stereotype of the silent, docile woman, Juani's textual authority represents a patriarchal transgression from the very beginning of the text. Representative of the one-and-a-half generation, Juani Casas is a first-generation Cuban who came to the United States at a young age with her family in 1978, just before the Mariel exodus in 1980. After the Mariel exodus, those who came over on small boats and rafts, or *balseros*, began to reshape the construct of Cuban identity in the U.S. by diversifying the Cuban diaspora, which many of Miami's Golden Exiles viewed as contamination, as Torres remarks.²⁸ She speaks English and Spanish fluidly, but does not recall much of her time in Cuba. Along with the other women in the novel, many of whom she calls her cousins although they share no blood relation, only the relation of being Cuban exiles, she and her cousins are subjected to traditional gender roles and expectations by their family and community. This can be observed when Juani reflects on her youth, recalling social events with these cousins. She notes "we had all been overprotected girls: Every one of us had had a chaperon on our first date, all of us had gone out in groups for years" (Obejas 60). What Juani defines as overprotection refers to the reinforcement of appropriate behavior for women in patriarchal societies, in which any attempt to violate the sexual purity and innocence of a woman is prevented by the chaperon and other members of the group to hold each other accountable. As Smith and Padula indicate, Cuban sexual norms are heavily influenced by colonial era Spanish culture and the Catholic Church, which "emphasized the need to contain female sexuality...female virginity and chastity were important factors in social standing" (169). The families of Juani and her cousins attempt to protect the sexual purity of their daughters by

providing supervision and thus securing the family's honor and, as such, an advantageous social standing. In the colonial era, the burden of honor "depended on the behavior of its women; an errant daughter could bring shame and ruin. Men's task was to guard family honor by defending the virtue of their wives and sisters" (169). As a traditional Cuban family, Juani's parents concern themselves with protecting family honor at all costs. However, despite the parents' efforts to delineate appropriately gendered behavior, Juani and her cousins point out the fallacy of their colonial, outdated belief system. While sharing a moment of recollection about dating at a young age and the need for supervision, Juani describes that she and her cousins share a giggle, followed by raucous laughter (Obejas 60). Their physical eruption with laughter represents a gender transgression, not only for laughing at the need for chaperones, but also by displaying raucous behavior that is not representative of the ideal, docile Cuban woman. Their laughter echoes Hélène Cixous' ideas from *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), as a group of women sit together in laughter, personifying the snakes on the head of Medusa, united in laughter about the male-centered world that attempts to subjugate them.

As a lesbian, Juani speaks openly of her sexual desires and romantic relationships and does not feel closeted. Her frankness is innovative, as homosexuality in Cuban society, both on the island and in diaspora, has been largely oppressed since the nation's independence in 1902, and even more so after the Revolution of 1959. Her sense of liberation is likely a result of her exile from Cuba, as Gayatri Gopinath asserts that a lesbian "can only exist outside of the 'home' (as household, community, and nation of origin)" (265). Given the well-documented persecution of homosexuals in Cuba, especially in the decades immediately following the Communist Revolution, this seems to be true for Juani, that exile allows her certain freedoms with regard to sexuality. While homosexuality goes against the mores of the Catholic Church, it was relatively

tolerated in Cuba prior to the revolution in 1959. During and after the revolution, homosexual men were persecuted, vilified, and tortured in the name of a (re)productive Communist society. Homosexuality was considered a product of American and European decadence and capitalist society that resulted in a lack of productivity (Peña 27; Hamilton and Dore 33). The portrait of a homosexual man in this era also clashed with the good revolutionary who was virile, masculine, and conquered women with ease. This marginalization and oppression of homosexuality is narrated in Senal Paz's *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* from 1991 and Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que anochezca* from 1992. However, overt and public discrimination was largely focused on homosexual men and, although lesbianism was frowned upon, it was not viewed as equally destructive to the revolution. For the most part, its repercussions were less severe than those faced by homosexual men because lesbianism was thought to be an "innocent perversion" (Smith and Padula 170). This difference in treatment can be observed in many ways, one of which includes Cuban pejorative vocabulary to refer to homosexuals: "there are some seven colloquial terms for lesbians while there are at least twenty-four for gay men" (170). In addition, as Peña indicates, this unequal treatment is also reflected in diasporic popular culture. In Spanish-language soap operas, "Cuban American gay men are often vilified...[and] Cuban American lesbians are hardly represented at all" (27). Still, Hamilton and Dore cite examples of implicit discrimination against lesbians on the island, especially in the workplace, where they were "not being given jobs they were qualified for, or being fired on false pretenses" (178). These examples from Peña, Hamilton, and Dore demonstrate the silencing, whether it be through ignoring or forcing them out of the public eye, of Cuban and Cuban American lesbians. Overall, the treatment of homosexual men and women varied greatly during and after the late 1950s in Cuba, although both groups were chastised for their counterrevolutionary behavior. In *Memory*

Mambo, the non-violent reaction of Juani's parents to her lesbianism and attempts to hide it reflect Smith and Padula's assertion that repercussions for Cuban lesbians are more implicit, occurring in the private sphere, but also in the conservative Catholic belief system that does not allow for the conceptualization of non-heterosexual relationships and woman's sexual satisfaction.

Although Juani is subjected to the expectations and norms of what defines appropriate behavior for women, she is unable to perform perhaps one of the most important roles of a traditional Cuban woman: heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Juani is a lesbian, preferring instead to have sexual and romantic relationships with other women and, in the time period in which she lives and in the eyes of the Catholic Church, unable to legally marry. The intersection of gender and sexuality, then, can be observed in her transgression of perhaps the most basic role of women in Cuban society, in that she is a woman who does not seek to marry a man and have children. She, instead, exists outside of heterosexual binaries that would force her to be subordinate to a husband. Her desire to pursue sexual pleasure, in addition, is another perversion of gender norms. In traditional Cuban society, sexual satisfaction is reserved only for men, while the purpose of sex for women is limited to procreation only (Hamilton and Dore 25; Crespo-Kebler 196). For Juani, sexual relations are relegated entirely to the realm of pleasure, negating the need to reproduce. This creates distance with her family who, although they are aware of Juani's sexual orientation, are unable to understand. She remarks, "my lesbianism is not the cause of my alienation, but it's part of it. My mother knows about me; we've talked about it. These are unsteady, clumsy conversations. Her basic reaction is Catholic: she is mystified but defers, both to her vague knowledge of the church's condemnation, and to the fact of my existence" (Obejas 79). The reaction of Juani's mother demonstrates the power of the Catholic

Church in the Cuban imaginary, especially when referring to sexual norms. For this reason, Juani's mother is not educated on lesbian identities, but also condemns her daughter for living in such a way that would contradict the teachings of the Bible. Still, while describing her mother's treatment, Juani is able to insert sarcasm and humor into the dialogue by referring to her mother's *vague* knowledge about the Catholic doctrine. This implies that her mother does not attend church regularly or is not a faithful practitioner, instead choosing to practice halfheartedly. Juani's humorous revelation destabilizes the image of her seemingly pious family, and thus all conservative Cubans, as strict Catholics. Her conversations with her parents serve to highlight heteronormative gender binaries predominant in both her family and community. For example, similar to her mother, Juani's father responds with confusion when faced with her lesbianism. She says:

We don't talk about it...my father creates an illusion of normalcy about the emptiness of our interactions, our meaningless chats. If anyone at a family gathering or party starts in on when I'm going to find the right man and get married, I can always count on my father to rescue me with a quick comment about women's liberation, or there being no man alive good enough for his daughter. His motivation isn't to spare me the discomfort but to save himself (80).

Instead of being up-front and honest about Juani's sexuality, her father instead publicly attributes her unmarried status to the fact that no man is good enough for her, alluding to the heterosexual binary. However, her language here is telling: the "illusion" of normalcy that her father creates, demonstrates Juani's awareness of the falsity of their relationship. What is more, the silencing of lesbians that Peña, Hamilton, and Dore describe is underlined here as Juani's father refuses to speak with his daughter about her sexual orientation, but also does not allow her to speak for

herself at family gatherings. Illusion and silence could be extended to Cuban beliefs regarding sexuality and the need for marriage: by definition, an illusion is a deceptive appearance or perception of something, but also a false idea or belief. From there, one can deduce that Juani feels that the Cuban cultural imaginary is, simply that, an imagined construct filled of false beliefs, which she problematizes both by existing on the opposite end of the heterosexual spectrum and by utilizing language that reflects doubt regarding its validity. In addition, she uses sarcasm to refer to her father as a savior, *rescuing* her from conversations about her sexuality. Her humor subverts the image of the man, and particularly the father, as a heroic figure who must provide salvation for wayward women, including lesbians, and disrupts patriarchal gender ideals.

Throughout *Memory Mambo*, the construction of race, and the belief in a “Cuban race” by non-Cubans, intersects substantially with sexuality, gender, and social class. Within the Cuban American community, women, as the bearer of children and mothers of future generations, are responsible for reproducing a favorable “race” and choosing partners who will aid in doing as such. In this sense, then, woman’s sexual activities, which were already monitored by their families and society in general, were also limited to certain partners whose skin color seemingly benefitted or maintained the elite status of a family and future generations of Cubans both on and off the island. In the latter half of the 20th century, more waves of Cubans sought political asylum in the United States. In *Memory Mambo*, Juani reveals that her family relocated to the U.S. in 1978 on a small boat, along with fourteen other passengers. Their exodus represents a precursor to perhaps the largest and most controversial Cuban mass migration, which left from the Port of Mariel in April of 1980.²⁹ This description also serves as an indicator

of her family's economic situation, as those with wealth often emigrated via airplane or larger, more luxurious boats.

Racial categories in Cuba vary greatly from those in the United States. Whereas race in the U.S. is constructed along a black/white binary, Cuban racial categories exist along a spectrum of different shades of black and white. The need for a Cuban racial spectrum as opposed to a binary can be attributed to the relative absence of white women during the colonial period in Cuba. Due to a lack of women, and European or white women especially, women of color became romantic and sexual partners out of necessity in the patriarchal regime. As Smith and Padula remark, "sexual rivalry between white and black men was fierce...wide-scale miscegenation between whites and blacks produced a large mulatto population" (9). African and Afro-Cuban women served as objects of sexual conquest in the colonial period, involuntarily contributing to the construction of multiple Cuban racial categories. In the U.S., categories like *mulato* were, and still are, interpreted as black, rather than as a gradient on a spectrum. What is more, Cuba, a relatively small country in comparison to others in Latin America, was the last formerly-Spanish colony to abolish slavery, resulting in a populous black labor force and a higher concentration of blacks to whites on the island in terms of both men and women. However, despite their large population, the popular cultural image of African and Afro-Cubans as uncivilized, sexually dangerous savages persisted in the minds of white Cubans and resulted in praise for lighter skin colors and active efforts to reduce mixing of black and white Cubans. Still, given the prevalence of mixing during the colonial period between black and white, most Cubans are of mixed racial heritage, but attempt to whiten their bloodline by marrying white. In terms of sexual relations, women were relegated to sex during marriage, and for reproductive purposes only, never for pleasure. Men, however, were expected and encouraged to engage in

sexual relations at a young age, and were not limited to a particular race, although children produced in extra-marital affairs, especially with women of color, were largely ignored and not recognized as legitimate members of the family. These behaviors feature widely in Cuban literature dating back to the 19th century, such as in *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, and more recently in Cuban American literature, such as Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters*.

In *Memory Mambo*, Juani's family displays these patterns of behavior regarding race and gender-based sexual expectations. As Juani discusses her parents' marriage, she recalls that "my father didn't even sleep with my mother their whole first year of marriage because, supposedly, he respected her so much; he went to brothels instead" (Obejas 31). Her vocabulary is deceptive, at first glance showing that her mother's virtue and honor were the reasons for which her father frequented brothels during their early marriage. However, by inserting *supposedly* into her statement, she shows both doubt and sarcasm, and questions the legitimacy of her mother's claims of sexual purity. With regard to race, it is important to note that the labor force in Cuban brothels is typically limited to black women,³⁰ thus showing the double standard that allows Juani's father to have intercourse with women of color, but not allowing her mother to have relations outside of the marriage at all, especially not with a black man. Juani challenges the cultural beliefs related to sexual and racial purity by questioning the actions of her own parents. What is more, as Juani describes, her mother is not as white as she attempts to display: she is "a *café con leche mulata* from Guanabacoa" (32). Even her mother, then, is of a mixed racial background, although she denies her heritage. While she may be perceived as lighter skinned in Cuba, Juani's use of the term *café con leche* to describe her mother signifies mulatto, and thus indicates that she has African lineage. As Peña notes, "Cuban American definitions of whiteness are greatly influenced by Cuban racial categories" (24). Therefore, while Juani's mother might

pass as white in Cuba, it is unlikely that she will in the U.S. as well. To disrupt her mother's fantasy of being white, Juani remarks, "just touch the *pasitas* on her head" (32). The word *pasitas*, though literally meaning "raisins," refers to the coarse knots of hair on her mother's head, typical of African-influenced hair texture and style. Her revelation reveals that, despite her mother's attempts to hide any African lineage, Juani is aware of the falsity of her mother's constructed racial identity. The act of rejecting her physically obvious genetic makeup is furthered by her mother's choice to marry Juani's father, who is described as having light colored eyes and pale skin. Upon marrying and creating a family with a light-skinned man, Juani's mother guarantees that her children "would be colorless and beautiful" (32), aligning with Cuban beauty ideals and also serving as a method to join a higher social class. This fantasy heritage is not limited to Juani's mother, as her father also ignores his African bloodline, and instead invents a mythical relation to Bartolomé de Las Casas. This allows for a fantasy heritage of a white, noble Spanish lineage to continue from generation to generation, eventually forming part of the family's historical memory. However, Juani asserts, "curiously, that Bartolomé de las Casas was a Catholic priest sworn to celibacy is always left out of the family stories" (33). The word *curiously* again demonstrates her sarcasm and doubt regarding the family's supposed legacy. By also revealing that this is frequently absent from family stories, she also creates a space to question what other elements are redacted from family history, including true racial lineage, possible miscegenation and sexual inappropriateness, among other possibilities. In addition to marrying advantageously herself, Juani's mother tries to assure that her daughters will pass as white and marry a suitable partner, possibly motivating their emigration from Cuba, as we see throughout the narrative. First, she encourages her children to walk in the shade because "she was terrified that too much sun would somehow reveal our heritage, whether Indian

or black” (34). By maintaining a fair skin color, which the sun could damage, her children have a better chance of passing as white in both Cuba and the United States. Whiteness, then, will improve the family’s social status, affording them more beneficial marriages and educational and financial opportunities. In addition, after the Communist Revolution, in which her mother observed black men marching alongside Fidel and Raúl Castro, she feigns an urge to emigrate because she does not want her daughters to become involved with “anybody a shade darker than us” (35). In her vision, the United States is an ideal place to where they can relocate because of the large concentration of “frog-eyed white people” (35), thus securing a gainful marriage and future for her daughters. However, by describing the supposedly more attractive North Americans as *frog-eyed*, Juani subverts Cuban racial and beauty ideals by highlighting possibly unattractive qualities like, in this case, large, light-colored eyes. Juani’s sarcastic and, at times, doubtful tone with respect to her own family and by extension Cuban racial beliefs disrupts the image of a white diasporic community, and instead recognizes the obvious elisions from and creative imagination with regard to historical lineage.

Much to the dismay of Juani’s mother, being white in Cuba does not equate to whiteness in the United States, despite outer and intra-Latino rhetoric of Cubans as being the whitest of Latinos. Immediately before and following the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban elites who fled the island were “generally racialized as white in the context of South Florida” (Peña 23). Their whiteness, among other traits, led to preferential treatment over other Latinos, such as Mexican Americans, who had more ethnic inheritance from indigenous bloodlines and thus, darker skin. As such, intra-Latino relations became tense, as non-Cuban Latinos viewed Cubans in the U.S. as belonging to a privileged class. This is best exemplified by Juani’s relationship with Gina, her Puerto Rican girlfriend. Juani knows that Gina views her as “automatically more privileged”

(Obejas 78) just because of her Cuban background. During one of their frequent political arguments, as Gina sides with the Communist Revolution, Juani recalls Gina's remark that Cubans are "racists and classists and that we only made fun of Puerto Ricans because most of them were darker and poorer than us" (122). Gina's opinions are more than likely influenced by the elite Golden Exiles, along with the mistreatment of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. by both Anglo and non-Anglo Americans. Although Juani attempts to remain neutral when her family makes racist comments about Puerto Ricans, her neutrality and silence translates to complicitness, infuriating Gina. However, aware of this, Juani's cousin, Patricia, comments on the absurdity of their racist remarks and Juani's overall silence, saying, "you can let them know you think that kind of thing is out of line" (123). Patricia's comment shows a generational shift in the Cuban American community, displaying a critical stance toward racism and classism towards other Latinos.

In addition to intra-Caribbean and intra-Latino racial prejudices, Juani and Gina also struggle with their sexual identities with regard to race and national identity. Gina regards sexual identity as a convenience that only white people, including Cubans, have time to contemplate. For Gina, coming out as a lesbian would otherwise cause her to become "distracted from her *puertorriqueñismo*" (78), meaning that she could not entirely focus on the Puerto Rican independence movement to which she belongs. Throughout the novel, this independence movement is inspired by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and Gina's views on public homosexuality reflect those of the Cuban Revolution, in that it is another excess that results from capitalism. Although Juani insists that she is not political, Katherine Sugg notes that there are "many ways that her political affiliations and allegiances are in fact complex and contradictory" (473) as a result of colonial forces that have shaped her identity. In fact, if what Gina believes

stands to be true, that sexual orientation threatens the idea of an independent nation, then Juani's nature as a lesbian is entirely political as it disrupts the construct of a homogenous Cuban American nation and identity. Still, despite her marginalized position within her own community, in a larger Latino context, Juani is viewed as belonging to a higher social class simply because she is Cuban. The political, racial, and sexual tension between Gina and Juani results in several fights throughout the course of the novel, ultimately culminating in their momentary violent episode and break-up. However, they also reveal important intra-Latino perspectives on perceived Cuban exceptionalism in the United States.

Different from the structure of *Memory Mambo*, Jennine Capó Crucet's 2009 publication, *How to Leave Hialeah*, is a collection of eleven short stories that revolve around the lives of Cuban Americans in Hialeah, the large, working-class suburb to the north of Miami. The last story in the collection, which also shares a title with the collection itself, "How to Leave Hialeah," introduces a second-person narrator who explains different ways in which she distances herself, both physically and ideologically, from her home town of Hialeah. The perspective of the story, along with the instructional, how-to title, make it read like a satirical escape guide, engaging with young Cuban American women in Hialeah. In addition, the second-person narration creates emotional and ironic distance not only from the community, but also from the protagonist herself, whose name remains a mystery throughout the story. The story details her journey from young, high school student in Hialeah to graduate school "in the Great White North" (Capó Crucet 160) and beyond, punctuated by family interactions, romantic relationships, and several moments of self-introspection and doubt. However, despite the comic nature of the story, it raises important questions about the constructs of gender, sexuality, race, and social class within the Cuban American community. Hialeah represents a microstructure of

the homogenous Cuban diasporic nation centered in South Florida, mostly white and upper to middle-working class, and the protagonist's urging to leave that community represents a departure from such a homogenizing view of what it means to be Cuban in the United States, and especially a Cuban American woman.

Similar to the women characters in *Memory Mambo*, the expectation of advantageous marriage and subsequent child-bearing are present in the dialogue between the protagonist, her family, and her Hialeah community in "How to Leave Hialeah." Patriarchal values permeate the dialogue between characters, especially in the protagonist's interactions with her parents. Early on, she indicates the authoritarian role of her father in the family, when she turns to his approval for arranging bedroom furniture (153), among other trivial decisions. This symbolizes his need to control all aspects of his daughter's life, but especially those actions that take place in the most sacred of spaces – the bedroom – even if it is only in regard to furniture placement. More explicitly, the protagonist alludes to her father's control of sexual knowledge and education within the family. She recalls listening to a vague sex talk by her mother, "which your father has forced her to give you" (155). Her father's control in this situation is two-fold: first, he controls the actions of the protagonist's mother, who is submissive to his lead, and second, he protects the prestige of his own family by ensuring that his daughter is properly educated on sexual norms and expectations of the Cuban American community. Moreover, in line with what Smith and Padula indicate, her father's interests are not in the sexual education of his daughter, but rather maintaining the family honor by having a virtuous (i.e. virgin) daughter. The patriarchal grasp is also seen in the sex talk itself, in which the protagonist's mother reveals that she was a virgin when she married, while her future-husband was "sort of" (155) a virgin. Equivalent to the double-standard Juani reveals in *Memory Mambo*, Cuban men are not expected to remain chaste

until marriage and, in fact, are encouraged to conquer many women, which is absolutely not the case for women. The protagonist is aware of this gendered contradiction, noting that her first boyfriend attempted to have intercourse with her multiple times because he knew that feelings of shame and the question of honor would ultimately keep her from leaving him (154). The narrator uses sarcasm to criticize the imbalance of sexual power within men and women in the Cuban American community, remarking that, after leaving Hialeah, “you have had sex with one and a half guys...and yes, there’d been guilt, but God did not strike you dead” (157). Her statement reflects the common belief that premarital sex, for women, results in permanent damnation in and outside of the Catholic Church and subverts her boyfriend’s sexual power in the relationship. Her humor and satirization of patriarchal sexual ideals for women, through the use of exaggerated and sarcastic dialogue, reveals their fallacy. This comical speech act disrupts the normative Cuban American imaginary by revealing its ridiculousness and inability to frighten the protagonist and the reader, perhaps a young woman in Miami, as she interpolates to her in the second-person narrative style.

The story also briefly mentions the existence of homosexuality in Cuban America, while discussing the death of the protagonist’s cousin in Hialeah. Although few details are narrated, she notes that this cousin’s relationship with a “special lady-friend, with whom she’d been living the previous eight years” (166) results in a family scandal that alienates this cousin. Instead of referring to her cousin’s significant other directly as a partner or girlfriend, she uses the term adopted by her family, *special lady-friend*, which downplays the significance of their relationship but also allows the family to ignore any appearance of sexual impropriety. This again reflects the overall effort among Cubans to hide or ignore women’s homosexuality, rather than punishing it. As is the case with Juani in *Memory Mambo*, this relationship could be seen as

just a phase by the rest of the family, given the vague title for her obvious romantic partner. However, the protagonist plays with this term, subverting its power as a label that hides her cousin's true sexual identity and instead reveals its delusion, as the hyphen and italics demonstrate that she is sarcastically repeating what her family says. Her cousin's actions ultimately serve as a transgression of gender and sexual practices in the Cuban diasporic community, contrasting with *Memory Mambo*, in which the protagonist is a lesbian. The discourse surrounding gender and sexuality in "How to Leave Hialeah" dismantles the patriarchy from within the heterosexual binary rather than on the outside.

Similar to what is observed in *Memory Mambo*, women are expected to remain celibate until marriage, relegating sex, and therefore reproduction, exclusively to marriage. However, these relationships also serve the purpose of ideologically reproducing the nation, in Marx's vision of "social reproduction," which means raising children within these same cultural belief systems. As Gopinath has pointed out, women "serve not only as the site of biological reproduction of national collectivities, but as the very embodiment of this nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition" (263). For the Cuban American community of Golden Exiles, this idea of communal past and tradition includes the period of slavery and miscegenation that characterized the racial hierarchy in Cuba. As such, intersecting with gender and sexuality, families favored sexual relationships that would produce white children, erasing markers of indigenous or African lineage and instead promoting a fantasy European legacy. As seen in *Memory Mambo* when Juani's mother insists on keeping her daughters out of the sun and ensuring that they marry white men, this practice of whitening is also reflected in "How to Leave Hialeah" when the protagonist recalls her failed romantic relationship with a student at her university, who happens to be from Spain. She says, "do not tell your mother you broke things

off; she loves Spaniards, and you are twenty and not married and you refuse to settle down” (159). More than likely echoing the exact words of her mother, noting her age and lack of desire to marry, she utilizes sarcasm to reverse the power of her mother’s words that necessitate marriage at a young age and to a whiter man. What is more, the love that her mother displays for Spaniards reflects a fantasy European heritage, much like that of Juani’s father, that would serve to whiten the family’s bloodline. Her need to hide this break-up from her mother reflects that she is aware of both the familial and social consequences of ending this relationship along with the pressure that her family places on racially beneficial marriage. Later, after starting graduate school, the protagonist moves to the Midwest. There, she notes that she feels more Cuban than ever (160), surrounded by mostly Anglo Americans, but she struggles to maintain her exotic, bronzed appearance in the cold, dark winters. Reflecting perceptions of race, she states the need to “sneak into tanning salons to maintain what you call your natural color...relax when the fake sun actually does make you brown, rather than the play-dough orange beaming off your students – you have genuine African roots! You knew it all along” (161). Instead of rejecting any non-European ancestry, she relies on it to give her more credibility as an exotic *Other*. She reclaims African heritage as a part of Cuban identity, as opposed to trying to retain her white skin, as her mother wants, and like Juani’s mother desired in *Memory Mambo*. She tries to maintain brown skin in order to appear, in her perception, more Cuban. However, her exaggerated exaltation of exotic Latina otherness also begs the question of modification in regard to Cuban American identity as relative to geographical location. Her explanation and justification for going to the tanning bed while living in the north reveals the extent to which Cuban identity, especially outside of Miami, is constructed by those outside of the community itself and reflects a Pan-U.S. Latino identity. What is more, it demonstrates the interconnectedness of Cuban Americans with

other minority groups in the U.S., such as the African American or other Latino communities, as the brown or black other. At her university, the protagonist is labeled as “Mexican or something” (160) by her department, demonstrating the overarching homogenization of the Latino community outside of Miami. In general, where the Latino community is not as densely concentrated, like in the Midwest, Latinos are rarely distinguished by national origin, are characterized as brown and, as such, are relegated to lower economic and social status. It is only when she leaves the Miami enclave that the protagonist is able to construct an identity that does not fall in line with the image of a conservative, white, anti-leftist Cuban American coming out of South Florida. By subverting racial expectations and choosing instead to celebrate her darker pigment, comically acknowledging her African roots that are exalted by a tanning bed, she subverts the discourse of Cuban whiteness and, as such, the idea of Cuban exceptionalism that places them in a higher social class than other Latinos.

The myth of Cuban exceptionalism has long referred to a perceived higher social class within the U.S. Latino community. The first wave of Cuban Americans was whiter, more educated, and wealthier, in comparison to other Latin American diasporas in the United States, and this image persisted for many decades. What is more, the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, which allowed Cubans to obtain a green card after one year and one day of residency in the U.S., has created tension with other Latino groups who struggle to obtain visas, residency, and overall legal status. However, both *Memory Mambo* and “How to Leave Hialeah” highlight the class struggles of Cubans that came after the Golden Exiles, and an overarching lack of class mobility for their characters, putting the myth of continued exceptionalism into doubt. In Capó Cruet’s narrative, the implications of social and economic class are more evident as she both geographically and ideologically steps away from the Miami enclave. While still living in

Hialeah, the narrator's family reinforces the beliefs of Cuban exceptionalism, distinguishing this community from other Latino groups. One particular myth arises when she mentions her family being indestructible. She states, "they have floated across oceans and sucker-punched sharks with their bare hands...death is far off for every Cuban" (158). Death could refer to literal death at sea, but also immigration status, in which Cubans are granted asylum in the U.S., unlike other migrants who may be forced to return to their home countries and face danger and possibly death. However, the exaggerated scenario, language and humor question the validity of these shared family and community fantasy legacies while she is away at college. What is more, the fact that she refers to them floating across the ocean, not flying, alludes to her own family's economic situation, and the many *balseros*, or rafters, who made it across the Gulf of Mexico by any means possible, without financial recourse to better modes of transportation.

Still, despite a dominant discourse of exceptionalism among her family, the protagonist of "How to Leave Hialeah" becomes aware of the limitations of her socio-economic class while studying at the university, showing how gender, ethnicity, and class mobility intersect. She realizes that, despite her existence as a middle-class Cuban American in Hialeah, she is still viewed as lower-class outside of this Latino enclave because she is not Anglo. These beliefs are best exemplified in her interactions with a senior student at her university, whom she dates briefly, and is interested in researching her experience "growing up in *el barrio*" (161). It is in this moment that the narrator realizes how others view Miami and its Cuban community: the use of the Spanish word *el barrio*, literally translating to just "the neighborhood," has come to connote lower economic class, danger, and violence in areas with large Latino populations, such as New York City's Lower East Side, East Los Angeles, and, of course, Miami. In addition, her mostly white, elite institution refers to her in private as a *spic*, a pejorative term relegated to

Hispanics in the U.S., which she overhears while passing department offices. The narrator then remarks that she “can’t stop laughing. You have not heard the word *Spic* used in the last decade. Your parents were *Spics*. *Spics* is so seventies” (163). She subverts this outdated pejorative nature of this term by mocking it and revealing its lack of power in her era. Later, she names the computer file of her dissertation *Spictacular*, again removing the destructive power of this term and reappropriating it as something comical and powerful. However, when she returns to Hialeah for her cousin’s funeral, she realizes that class is relative to one’s surroundings and that, in fact, being middle-class in Hialeah means lower-class in other places. She mentions that she never “noticed the *rejas* (every house around for blocks had them)” (168), referring to the bars that cover windows and doors as a deterrent to would-be criminals that have become a normalized part of their architecture. This reflects the danger and possible violence of Hialeah, alluding to outsider ideas of *el barrio* and challenging her previous notions of class and exceptionalism.

In her experiences outside of Miami, and upon returning after living in another area, the narrator becomes aware that what was once believed to be Cuban exceptionalism is, much like the stories of her shark-punching family, a myth. She comes to realize that, outside of Miami, the U.S. Latino community is constructed as one homogenous unit that is both brown and lower class, differing from her experiences while growing up in south Florida among other Latinos. It is, then, the physical and ideological distance from Hialeah and Miami that allows the protagonist to fully understand her lack of social mobility as both a Cuban and a woman in the Anglo-dominated U.S. culture. The narrator makes her reader aware not only of intra-Latino prejudices, but also the limitations imposed upon Cuban Americans, and by extension Latinos, due to the stereotypes surrounding this community and its homogenization outside of the Miami enclave.

These intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class in *Memory Mambo* and “How to Leave Hialeah” describe an evolving construction of Cuban American identity. Both Juani and the protagonist of “How to Leave Hialeah” demonstrate an awareness of intra-Latino hierarchies that view Cubans as elitist and reject notions of a homogenous Cuban American and Latino experience. Referring specifically to *Memory Mambo*, Katherine Sugg remarks that Juani has “some serious questions as to what cultural memory does to and for her” (470). This could be said for both Juani and the narrator of “How to Leave Hialeah,” as both women struggle with their identities as outsiders both in and outside of the Cuban American community. What was initially a white, conservative, and upper-class community within the Latin American diaspora is now narrated and protagonized in literature by women who question the validity of this image for today and historical memory of yesterday that no longer holds true. By exposing and confronting the shared normative cultural imaginary with humor and sarcasm, these narrators problematize the idea of Cuban exceptionalism and Golden Exile-era politics that limit women’s identity to one small box of possibilities.

One prevalent theme that aids these narrators in their analysis and subsequent critique of Cuban American identity is distance. Both narratives primarily take place outside of the Miami enclave, providing not just ideological separation, but also physical, which allows these women to experience their identities in a non-Cuban dominated setting. Juani’s story in *Memory Mambo* takes place in Chicago, where she is surrounded by other Latino national groups, and the narrator for “How to Leave Hialeah” moves to the predominantly white Midwest to begin her career. What is more, in the case of “How to Leave Hialeah,” the second-person narrative style creates an emotional distance from the protagonist who, instead of relating her experiences from the first-person point of view, chooses to interpellate the reader and perhaps future generations of

Cuban American women in Hialeah. These two narratives expose our Cuban American narrators to other Latino groups which in turn causes them to reveal intra-Latino tensions and question the myths regarding Cuban identity in the United States.

Additionally, the narrators of these works do not fulfill their societal role as mothers and (re)producers of community and culture. Instead, they expose flaws in a shared cultural belief system and de-produce, or sterilize, the previously constructed version of Cuban American identity and hegemony that is rooted in fantasy and excludes them. As Homi Bhabha conveys in his idea of *dissemiNation*, the narrative can serve to construct or, in this case, deconstruct pre-conceived notions of a particular national identity, which is what these narratives do by questioning and debunking myths and beliefs surrounding what it means to be Cuban American. For their coming-of-age format, they are characteristic of Ortiz's notion of confoundational, rather than foundational fictions, as these texts expose the limits of previous constructions of Cuban American identity and nation. Revealing and criticizing where the constructs of patriarchy and myth of Cuban exceptionalism fail, these intersectional narrators speak their truths from an interstice, wedged between two cultures to which they do not fully belong. In a sense, they simultaneously present diverse Cuban American women and re-present a new, overall diverse construction of Cuban American identity and diasporic nation.

CHAPTER 3

BODIES THAT SPEAK: RESISTING NORMATIVE DEFINITIONS OF DOMINICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN LOIDA MARITZA PÉREZ'S *GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME* AND ANGIE CRUZ'S *SOLEDAD*

**“NoNo. I will not fall or flinch. I will not let you or anyone else ever knock me down again.
I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone”
(Pérez 313)**

Perhaps even less understood than its Cuban counterpart, the Dominican diaspora in the United States and its cultural production is an area ripe for scholarly investigation. Although a mass migration of Dominicans does not make its way to the U.S. until the early 1960s, the Dominican Republic and the United States share a long, complicated history that begins roughly in the mid-nineteenth century when the Dominican Republic appealed for annexation to the U.S. Congress.³¹ Decades later, the authoritarian regime of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and his successor, Joaquín Balaguer, were the catalyst for a large-scale migration of Dominicans to the United States, and where many prominent contemporary Dominican American artists and writers originate. This is to say that the Dominican American community in mass numbers has a relatively short history in the United States, unlike its Cuban and Puerto Rican counterparts, although all three Hispanic Caribbean diasporic groups have had some presence in the United States since the nineteenth century. However, despite the recent nature of this migratory phenomenon, the Dominican diasporic population has seen many demographical shifts and changes in terms of socio-economic makeup, gender representation, and racial composition in the United States. That which defined Dominican American identity in the 1960s, and what dictates mainstream conceptualizations and formations of Dominican American identity today, much like its Cuban American counterpart, requires some revision as the image of this community continues to shift away from its conservative, 1960s-era composition.

As with the Cuban and Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S., Dominican American identity is still largely tied to the homeland in terms of shared cultural imaginaries and historical memory, given that many families have only one or two generations living outside of the island. Similar to their Hispanic Caribbean counterparts, Dominican ideas regarding gender roles, sexual practices, race, and class reflect those of a larger Caribbean context that dates back to the colonial era and the domination of the Catholic Church and Western European values. As Dominicans migrate to the United States, cultural beliefs that exist in the homeland carry over to the diaspora, where the immigrant subject consolidates notions of identity acquired in the Dominican Republic, influenced by centuries of colonialism, whether by family members or themselves, in order to shape present constructions of identity (Méndez 6). While conservative Catholic views permeate the cultural imaginary on the island and in the diaspora, there is also a strong presence of syncretic belief systems in both Cuba and the Dominican Republic that introduce Western African religious practices as well. However, in the Dominican Republic, outward expressions of or belief in African heritage of any manifestation can result in public shaming or persecution due to the strong anti-black sentiment that surged during the Trujillo regime. Trujillo's platform on racism stems largely from the fact that racial context in the Dominican Republic is historically linked to Haiti, as Haiti, a self-proclaimed black republic, annexed the country shortly after its independence from Spain and retained control for several decades. Haiti's slave-revolt turned independence and post-independence massacre of white landowners ordered by emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines has also resulted in the characterization of Haiti as a black nation. As Torres-Saillant and Hernández remark in *The Dominican Americans*, "the fact that Dominican independence, the formal emergence of Dominicans as people, occurred as a separation from the black republic of Haiti, and that racial self-

differentiation has subsequently been used in nationalist discourse, has added levels of complexity to the racial identity of Dominicans” (4). Thus, a dark-skinned Dominican is inherently more Haitian, and grates against the Dominican ideal of national identity and beauty. Due to the influence of conservative patriarchal and Catholic values inherited from the colonial era, the role of woman is similar between both Cuba and the Dominican Republic. In general, woman is to remain pious, sexually pure, docile, and her main purpose is to marry a man and continue his legacy by producing offspring. Sexual activity is meant only for reproductive purposes, of course, as she must protect her family’s honor and remain virtuous. What is more, because of anti-blackness and pro-European values permeating the national discourse, the ideal Dominican (man or woman) is light-skinned, embodying closer ties to Europe. As such, woman should constantly seek to better themselves, their families, and the nation through (racially) advantageous marriage and reproduction. In these ways, gender, race, sexuality, and class intersect both within the shared belief system of the Dominican Republic and that of its diaspora in the United States.

In terms of cultural production, some of the first Dominican cultural works produced in the diaspora reinforce normative gender roles and racist, anti-Haitian paradigms. Perhaps the most well-known Dominican American woman author, Julia Álvarez creatively narrates this cultural atmosphere both on the island and in the U.S. Dominican community in the New England region. She sheds light on the experience of a Dominican woman in diaspora, expected to remain chaste, submissive, and seek out light-skinned partners, exposing these colonial era values that persist in the twentieth-century. However, many of Álvarez’s most celebrated works, such as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Wedding in Haiti*, implicitly reinforce existing mainstream binaries and the stereotypes regarding a Dominican race. For example, in

García Girls, the middle-class García family employs a “Haitian blue-black” (Álvarez 218) nanny named Chucha while living in the Dominican Republic, who is subsequently left behind when the family abruptly immigrates to the United States. The pairing of the words “Haitian” and “blue-black” reinforces the belief that Haitians are darker than Dominicans, and serves to distinguish the nanny from the whiter García family. Conversely, the García family views their own racial composition as being “Dominican *café con leche* black” (218). Her description also alludes to notions of a Europeanized race by utilizing Spanish words to describe themselves, in addition to an explicit indication of nationality as either Haitian or Dominican that precedes either description. The description of blue-black versus *café con leche* distinguishes a skin color so dark that it almost appears as another color entirely from one that incites an appetizing, creamy and lighter, diluted shade of brown. Along with Álvarez, Junot Díaz has also popularized Dominican American literature within the U.S. market, publishing *Drown* in 1996 and the wildly successful *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2007. However, critics have long noted Díaz’s elision of women’s voices; in *Oscar Wao*, there is one lone chapter dedicated to Oscar’s sister, but it is underscored by the textual control of Yuniors, who footnotes and narrates the entire story. Despite his primarily masculine themes and narrators, Díaz’s contributions to the discussion of Dominican race and inherited racisms are invaluable, as he acknowledges their influence and writes against tropes that reinforce racial hierarchies.

Near the end of the twentieth century, new creative voices came to the forefront, publishing narratives that contest mainstream formations of Dominican American identity and protagonize women from different racial and class backgrounds. Writing from New York City, one of the largest Dominican hubs in the U.S., Loida Maritza Pérez, Nelly Rosario, and Angie Cruz bring new interpretations of the Dominican American woman, no longer submitting to

gender, racial, and class hierarchies of the post-1960s imaginary. Similar to what Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert has stated in *Daughters of Caliban*, these second-generation Dominican American writers display a knowledge of the fact that “the image of the closely chaperoned, virginal, white or light-skinned *señorita* that has long since stood as archetypical for Spanish-Caribbean womanhood is as race-, class-, and stereotype-bound as that of the happy-go-lucky unmarried black mother of the Jamaican or Trinidadian yard with her large brood” (6). Pérez, Rosario, and Cruz problematize these tropes of Caribbean, Dominican, and Dominican American identity by narrating the experiences of strong, independent Afro-Latina women who choose to recognize all parts of their heritage and resist dominant Eurocentric patriarchal forces through bodily excess and humor.

Perhaps two of the best examples of Afro-Dominican women’s voices and performative resistance in Dominican American narrative can be found in Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* from 1999 and *Soledad* by Angie Cruz from 2001. Both novels focus on young women of Dominican descent growing up in two New York City neighborhoods: Brooklyn and Washington Heights, respectively. Each woman struggles to find her place both within the home and the Dominican community in her neighborhood. Their resistance to normative gendered cultural values cause conflict and violence both in and outside of the family unit, as both men and women in their families and neighborhoods feel threatened by the presence of these young protagonists. Though little scholarship exists regarding these two novels to date, what has been said often falls into the trap of describing these works through a stereotyped, market-focused lens of Latin American literature that highlights literary tropes of *Latinidad* present in the narrative and nothing more. For example, the featured review on Scribner’s cover of *Soledad*, which comes from Katori Hall at *The Boston Globe*, hails the book as being “tinted with the magical

realism of Gabriel García Márquez,” perhaps unknowing of the misogynistic connotation that magical realism has for women as both characters and authors.³² The majority of research that has been done on these two novels focuses primarily on the protagonists’ relationships with their mothers, psychological and physical violence, religious and spiritual practices, and the question of race from a U.S.-based perspective. Currently, a comparative analysis of *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad* does not exist, much less an analysis that focuses on the Dominican imaginary of the island that continues within the historical memory of the Dominican American diaspora. This chapter brings a needed Latin American historical and theoretical foundation to the analysis of these novels and Dominican American identity as a whole.

Like their Cuban American literary counterparts, these Dominican American narratives reflect movement, in both a geographical and ideological sense, away from the nucleus of Dominican diasporic culture in the United States. In *Geographies of Home*, our protagonist, Iliana, attends an elite university located in upstate New York, far from her Brooklyn home, and it is here that she begins to question her identity and upbringing. In *Soledad*, the main character, Soledad, leaves Washington Heights for the East Village, and tries her hardest to not return because it represents a part of her identity that she wishes to suppress. Whereas the Cuban American narratives built up to an eventual leaving, these Dominican American novels show a back-and-forth movement, as the novels start with a homecoming (to Brooklyn and Washington Heights), and conclude with a final, permanent departure. This boomerang motion of each protagonist also represents the ideological movement of the text, as Iliana and Soledad move between their own ideas regarding identity and those of their family and community, but ultimately remain with their own. As each novel features a young woman searching for her place in her family and community, the narrative structure parallels the coming-of-age narrative.

However, instead of reinforcing mainstream constructions of Dominican and Dominican American identity, as coming-of-age novels do, these novels move away from this description to promote a diverse sense of identity that interrupts these foundations. While Ricardo Ortiz's idea of confoundational fiction refers to Cuban American coming-of-age stories, its general idea can be extended to these Dominican American texts as well. *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad* disrupt the idea of a homogenous community and diasporic nation. Each narrative confronts issues of intra-Dominican American discrimination and violence head on via corporeal expressions of resistance and humorous speech acts that challenge normativity.

As Juan Flores and George Yudice have stated in their essay, "Living Borders/Buscando América," with regard to the U.S. Latino population, history has taken shape "on the terrains of the body, sexuality, language, etc" (58). The Latin American and U.S. Latino body has long been a site of violence and conquest, with a history reaching back to the very arrival of Columbus in 1492. The female body has been a site of ritual violence perpetrated by both the patriarchy and, especially for black female bodies, racial politics. Violence in the name of family honor has subjugated Latin American women's bodies for centuries, creating a cycle of violence that reinforces cultural norms and values. However, this new wave of twenty-first century Dominican American women writers retake control of the Afro-Dominican body by handing over narratorial authority to protagonists who resist and overcome the violence incited by their families and communities. This chapter will analyze examples of bodily resistance in *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad* to show how and where the protagonists of each work go against the tropes of mainstream Dominican American identity. Employing theory regarding woman's body from Luce Irigaray and Susan Bordo, along with theory about the black woman's body from Audre Lorde and bell hooks, this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which each protagonist performs

resistive acts on her own body to challenge previous notions of Dominican American identity regarding intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class. In addition to bodily acts, the role of humor will also be examined as a form of resistance in each text. Both *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad* challenge and humor Dominican American identity construction via “provocative” and “torpid” bodies (Niebylski 26), upsetting gender norms through an excess of sexuality and a lack of engagement with or reaction to violence to which her body is subjected.

To begin a discussion about the Dominican American community, in a general sense, *The Dominican Americans*, published in 1998, by Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández provides context regarding migratory demographics of class, race, and gender for those who relocated during and after the 1960s. For a more recent and literary perspective, *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* by Danny Méndez, published in 2011, provides a link from sociological data regarding the Dominican diaspora to their cultural production. Méndez compares literary works from the early 20th to 21st Century, touching on questions of identity in diaspora, including *Geographies of Home* in his analysis. While Torres-Saillant and Méndez do address issues of gender, their theoretical focus is primarily on diaspora and migration and its effect on the processes of constructing identity. To discuss gender and sexuality in the two narratives in question, three critical works will be utilized: *Daughters of Caliban* by Consuelo López-Springfield from 1997, the 2004 interview “Voices From Hispaniola” by Silvio Torres-Saillant, and *Oshun’s Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas* by Vanessa Kimberly Valdés from 2014. The works by López-Springfield and Valdés contextualize religious practices and religious characterization of women in the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean. Torres-Saillant’s interview invites Dominican American authors to discuss gender and race in diaspora, including Loida Maritza Pérez, the author of

Geographies of Home. For critical context regarding race in the Dominican Republic, *Charcoal & Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature* by Claudette Williams from 2000 and *The Mulatto Republic: Class, Race, and Dominican National* by April J. Mayes from 2014 provide historical and literary analysis concerning the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in terms of racial stratification both on the island and in diaspora. In order to move the discussion to the Dominican American community specifically, *The Afro-Latino Reader: History and Culture in the United States* by Miriam Jiménez-Román and Juan Flores from 2010 provides information regarding the relationship, both negative and positive, between Afro-Latinos, and Dominicans in particular, with the African American community in the United States.

Similar to the construction of gender in Cuba, in the Dominican Republic, the thought processes surrounding gender roles and sexuality has its roots in the colonial era. As taught by the Catholic Church, women were expected to be innocent, docile, and subordinate to men. For much of the 19th century, this vision remained intact, through the processes of independence in 1821, 1844 and 1863 from Spain, Haiti, and Spain, again, respectively. Reinforcing conservative Catholic gender norms, teachers began to take on an important social role after the third independence of the Dominican Republic. In *The Mulatto Republic*, Mayes points out that in “the late nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century, the *normalista*, the teacher, symbolized the virtuous, educated woman committed to social uplift and national progress” (Mayes 120). As educators, teachers not only taught children the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace and at home, but also they served as examples for women regarding public behavior. However, because of their public position, as Mayes indicates, women teachers were on the front lines of social movement and progress towards gender equality. This continued

into the early 20th century, and especially during the U.S. occupation of the island from 1916 to 1924. During this period of eight years, women were given special permissions to work in sectors that were previously prohibited, such as clerical work related to the government and medicine.³³ Still, despite progress made by these women entering new sectors of the labor force, many men continued to push against the liberation that the U.S. occupation brought to women. One example, as Mayes points out, was Federico Antonio García, a Dominican nationalist against U.S. intervention who argued that men needed to make their homes “‘temples of perfection,’ [which] protected their manly honor, and sheltered the virtue of their wives and children. Patriotic duty, García insisted, rested in the man ‘who married, kept his wife saintly, and transformed his children into a *holy family*’” (123). Ultimately, sexual deviance and inappropriate behavior were aligned with the U.S. occupation and influence. As a result, shifts in national identity became more conservative in nature and “male nationalists idealized domesticity and the family as the new foundation of the nation. Women were present as daughters, wives, or mothers, but invisible as independent agents or political actors” (124). As Mayes discusses, they were afraid of prostituting the nation, as they felt they had done with their women, and Dominican political figures sought to regain control of the nation and, as a result, reinforce the patriarchy.

During the end of the U.S. occupation, the Dominican Republic experienced a period of relative political stability and economic growth. However, this was short lived, as a rising lieutenant colonel began to cause commotion within the ranks and eventually won the presidency in 1930. For the next thirty years, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo would head one of the most brutal regimes in all of the Caribbean. The progress that Dominican women experienced during the U.S. occupation came to a halt, and they soon realized that Trujillo did not have their best

interests at heart, despite his early support for the feminist movement. As Mayes notes, the Trujillo campaign was “draped in the religious piety of devotion to Mary and lived vividly through large, public marches and rallies, [and] attracted numerous educated, reform-minded women” (117). While it appeared as though Trujillo was making advances for women, his reforms were underscored by patriarchal and misogynistic end results. As Mayes points out, many of Trujillo’s supposed “reforms” for women were thinly veiled attempts at returning women to the domestic sphere after a brief period of exodus during the modernization of the nation in the mid-1920s in which women entered the work force in mass.³⁴ Despite rhetoric of *marianismo* and equality for women, it soon became clear that Trujillo was not on the side of feminists. Contrasting with the image of the authoritarian, virile dictator, discourse regarding women labeled them as “sacred and mortal virgins” (139) who must be protected by *el Padre de la Patria*. Similar to women’s experiences in Cuba, the modern era of the Dominican Republic has seen a series ebbs and tides regarding women’s liberation, ultimately culminating in a regression with the onset of a dictatorship that characterizes its 20th century history. Given that the majority of the Dominicans in the United States immigrated immediately after the death of Trujillo, many of their beliefs regarding gender roles and expectations stems from the nationalist and patriarchal imagery that came out of this dictatorship. However, similar to the freedoms that Cuban women experienced in diaspora, Dominican women also found a sense of emancipation while making a new life for themselves and their families in the United States.

The contemporary narratives in question here from Loida Maritza Pérez and Angie Cruz present similar experiences of diasporic Hispanic Caribbean women living in the U.S. who are marginalized from the larger U.S. cultural context, dominated by Anglo American norms, the Dominican diasporic community structured around pre and post-1960s migratory norms, and, on

an even more intimate scale, their own families. Both *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad* introduce the reader to young Dominican American women who find themselves caught between a Dominican shared memory that dates back to the early twentieth century and the current New York City social context in which they reside. In each novel, the protagonist criticizes the markers of identity that are forced upon her by family, friends, and community. With non-normative identities, these women exist in-between both Dominican and U.S. culture, which allows them to resist and criticize beliefs that limit them as both women and (Dominican) women of color. These narratives, like their Cuban American counterparts in the previous chapter, present a new, more diverse image of Dominican American identity in the twenty-first century.

Published in 1999, *Geographies of Home* narrates the story of a lower-middle class Dominican American family living in Brooklyn, New York. *Geographies of Home* is the one of the first mainstream literary representations of a Dominican American family dealing with issues of poverty in the U.S. Latina/o canon. It also puts the spotlight on Seventh Day Adventism and its influence in the Dominican Republic, as the family practices this religion fervently, and the repressive gender customs of this religion. While the story touches on the lives of all of the children of Aurelia and Papito, it focuses especially on Iliana, who is considered the outcast of her family for many reasons. Unlike her siblings, Iliana attends a prestigious university in upstate New York. She also disagrees with many of her family's decisions, including those related to religion, far from an ideal daughter in the eyes of her parents. However, for the most part, Iliana is quiet; she does not frequently verbalize her frustration with her parents or siblings, and she remains stoic through acts of violence that are committed against her. Instead of the dialogic humor found in contemporary Cuban American women's narratives, Iliana performs her

disapproval and rejection of mainstream values on the body. When Iliana argues with her parents, instead of dismantling their opinions through humor, Iliana turns her back or narrates that she has stopped listening completely. This form of performative, humored resistance, what Niebylski titles the torpid body, is effective because it demonstrates a body, and therefore an identity, that does not move beneath the weight of the social pressures forced upon her, but whose powerful wit allows her to simultaneously critique those social norms (26). In addition to torpid bodies, *Geographies of Home* also demonstrates resistance via provocative and ill bodies. The provocative body defends its right to pleasure, even if that pleasure is found outside of the bounds of what is considered acceptable for the Dominican American woman, and the ill body has a somatic response, becoming sick, to societal expectations that are cast upon her (26). The limitations placed upon the women characters of *Geographies of Home*, especially Iliana, are thus challenged through these torpid, provocative, and ill “gestures” of the body, alluding to Susan Bordo’s theory of resistance via gestures of the female body.

Throughout *Geographies of Home*, gender norms and roles that originate and have existed in the Dominican Republic since the onset of the colonial era manifest themselves in the collective memory of Iliana’s family in Brooklyn. Iliana’s father, called simply “Papito” by the protagonist and never revealing his true name, was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, strengthening the transnational ties between this family and their country of origin. Papito firmly believes in the practices of the patriarchy, aided in his faithful practice of Seventh Day Adventism, in which he is in control of his wife and daughters and must protect their chastity and the family’s honor at all costs. As Méndez remarks, “Papito reinstates the traditional Dominican patriarchal order in Brooklyn, literally under the sign of Trujillo...that literalness is connected to the *macho* ideology he adheres to and that he fosters throughout the novel by way of his religious

fanaticism” (171). These values come to light in Iliana’s interactions with Papito, and in her memories of growing up in their household under his reign. As a teenager, Iliana recalls that her family tried to convince her that marriage was more valuable than education and a career, which were seen as something extra that should not distract from family obligations. Her family, including parents and older siblings, insisted that all she needed “was a husband able to provide for all her needs” (Pérez 43). For her sisters, this is largely the case, as many of them married at a young age, with varying degrees of happiness, or they seek husbands while still living at home. Iliana, on the other hand, pursues a university education on scholarship to an elite university. Reinforcing the family’s patriarchal system of values, Papito, Aurelia, and Iliana’s siblings attend church services several times each week. While Iliana is home visiting, she attends a mass with her parents entitled “The Virtues of Marriage,” in which the pastor, in Iliana’s words, reminded her that “as a woman she was inferior to all men” (106). Discussing woman’s vanity, the pastor remarks on why this causes marriages to fail. It is clear that patriarchal gender roles persist not only within Papito and Aurelia’s house, but also in the larger context of the Dominican American community, and especially that of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Apart from her disagreement with the church’s doctrine that subordinates women to men, Iliana also struggles with her physical gender expression. From a young age, she notes having very masculine features, making her both self-conscious about her physical appearance, but also causing her to receive ridicule from her sisters. She describes herself as having “broad shoulders, meager breasts, narrow hips and excessively long arms” (258). Her family accuses her of “dressing like a man” (260) and not wearing enough makeup, which, in their perspective, limits her abilities of finding a husband. Her non-binary gender expression through her physical features and choice of clothing upsets the male-or-female-sex division within the Dominican

imaginary. According to Laura Halperin, “although Iliana is also affected by institutionalized racism, the structural violence with which she most evidently grapples is (hetero)sexism, as she defies gender norms in her behavior, aspirations, educational achievement, attire, and birth order that dictated she should have been born a boy” (74). As Halperin states here, Iliana also resists binary gender norms by interrupting the pattern of births between Aurelia and Papito. Although the pattern dictated that Iliana would be a boy, she instead was born as a girl, demonstrating another way in which her body breaks with, in this case, family tradition. In these moments, Iliana ignores her family and, though she says she will comply with their demands, does not change her habits to the degree that her family would desire. Iliana’s torpid body, resisting and rejecting her family’s demands, exposes the fallacy of mainstream Dominican cultural expectations with regard to her own identity. Her half-hearted compliance with their demands can be observed when Iliana decides to put on makeup for church, but chooses a shade of lipstick that “she hoped was not too bright” (260). Despite following their orders to wear makeup, Iliana chooses a color of which her family will not approve, in effect subverting their initial demands. In the end, Iliana asserts control over her own body by ridiculing her family’s expectations.

Stemming from her ambiguously gendered body, Iliana also experiences sexual violation at the hands of her sister, Marina, who believes that Iliana is a biological male. In an attempt to expose her imagined phallus and prove that Iliana is, in fact, male, Marina attacks her in the middle of the night, raping her multiple times. Although she initially retaliates with physical violence, Iliana eventually disconnects her body both physically and psychologically from the attack, and escapes into a dream-like state of semi-consciousness. Her motionless, torpid body allowed her to “succeed in keeping herself intact regardless of what else transpired” (285). It is her inert body that allows Iliana to protect herself and resist sexual violence at the hands of a

family member. As Niebylski notes in her study of Luisa Valenzuela's work, the torpid body, not to be misinterpreted as "a sign of mental and psychic lethargy at first – turns out to be the appropriately subversive tactic to resist and ultimately help counter the forces that attempt to control and subdue her" (77). This is certainly the case for Iliana, who deactivates any source of power that her sister, and prevailing discourses of binary gender expressions, wield over her lifeless body. As Vanessa Valdés explains, Iliana "disassociates from her body...she does all she can to maintain her body's integrity, giving attention to her limbs, her extremities" (81). Her body then becomes a medium on which national discourses surrounding women, black women in particular, and binary gender expressions are exposed and flattened by her lack of corporeal response. When Marina violates Iliana for the second time, Iliana's response is again one of disassociation: rather than fight back, she purges her body of any feeling and has a somatic response. Iliana experiences convulsions that send "bile and partially digested food heaving from her mouth" (Pérez 291). Biliious, an English word whose origin is bile, is used interchangeably with angry and ill-mannered. Therefore, Iliana's somatic, excessive response is not casual: her projection of bile can also be seen as a purging of hatred and anger directed at her from her sister, and by extension also from society, from her own body, effectively dismantling normative beliefs that would subjugate her dubiously gendered physique. No longer a torpid body, Iliana's performance shifts in this moment, revealing instead an ill, sick body that can no longer withstand the hatred and violence subjected upon her by society. In this sense, her sick body metaphorically becomes a site to reveal the disease that is the legacy of physical and sexual abuse against Dominican women that unconsciously pervades the historical memory of her family in the United States. This attack also raises questions regarding woman on woman violence, and specifically black woman on black woman violence, that occurs in Latin American

and Latino society. The historical hatred that Marina encapsulates reflects Audre Lorde's assertion in "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" that black women are born and raised to loathe anything that is black and female (151). This also corresponds to bell hooks' assertion that women of color grapple with internalized racism that causes them to feel "self-hate, to vent anger and rage at injustice at one another rather than at oppressive forces, to hurt and abuse one another" (55). Marina, an Afro-Dominican woman herself, becomes a symbolic warrior for patriarchal, racist, and heteronormative values that pervade the Dominican, Latin American, and Anglo American imaginary, despite their negative impact on her own self-perception.³⁵ Marina's attack demonstrates the uneasiness associated with non-binary gender expressions within Iliana's family, but also within the Dominican, Dominican American, and Western cultural imaginary.

Although traumatizing, Iliana's experience with Marina is not the catalyst for her ultimate rejection of family life and decision to leave home. After mistaking her visit with a college friend as a romantic date, Papito verbally and physically assaults Iliana for returning home at a late hour and being, as he assumes, sexually promiscuous. Similar to her reaction with Marina's rape, Iliana again disconnects herself mentally, and receives each hit with no physical reaction. Papito worries that Iliana's body, and therefore her chastity and honor, have been violated by the friend. As her father, and patriarchal superior, it is Papito's responsibility to protect and control Iliana's body. In an attempt to regain control over her body, Papito slaps Iliana, contradicting his own mission to protect her body from violence of any form. This violent episode represents a microcosm of the legacy of violence against (black) women's bodies in the Caribbean, Latin America, and North America. In this sense, the domestic or private sphere of the home becomes representative of the national or diasporic national sphere, in which the role of

the family plays an integral part in reinforcing the values of the state. Iliana's mental disassociation from her physical body in this scene also symbolizes her decision to separate from her family as well, revealed by her internal dialogue. Printed in italics to indicate that this is Iliana's private, internal narrative, she says, "I will not let you or anyone else ever knock me down again. I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone" (Pérez 313). In the moment that Iliana physically disconnects from her body, she also psychologically removes herself from her family, ultimately returning to college and planning to never go home again. Iliana acknowledges her genetic makeup that ties her to Papito, Marina, and other family members, but also realizes that her body and, ultimately her life, are not controlled by kinship ties. Iliana "understands that she cannot depend on her family for protection or love" (Valdés 82) after this incident, realizing that she must leave in order to care for herself. Here, family does not only refer to Papito, but the Dominican American community and its normative discourse of identity and (diasporic) nationalism that perpetuate violence and discrimination against women and, especially, women of color. This reveals a shift in identity politics, in that Iliana recognizes her biological connection to the Dominican diaspora, but discovers that it does not dictate her identity.

Perhaps one of the most poignant issues at stake in *Geographies of Home* is that of race, internalized racism, and how beliefs from the island transfer to and transform in the diaspora. From the beginning, it is clear that Iliana's family places a large value on having lighter-colored skin, praising their daughters who appear whiter and have less markedly African physical features. This belief system is salient in the scene where Iliana observes family photos, describing the different facial features of each sibling. Regarding herself, she notes that she had lips that "pouted so sullenly that despite chiseled cheeks and a nose her sisters envied as 'white'

she appeared the ugliest of the three” (Pérez 41). By placing the descriptor *white* in quotations, the narrative seemingly questions its veracity as an adjective for describing these facial features. She also describes herself as *ugly*, which problematizes the idea that white features are more desirable. Still, this scene indicates the important role of race and that of perceived race within her family. As Mayes points out, Dominicans are aware of the fact that they are racially mixed people, but still “adhere to idealizations of *dominicanidad* defined by its distance from blackness and its rejection of anything associated with Haiti and Haitians” (3). This corresponds with Ginetta Candelario’s assertion that Dominican identity has always relied on an anti-African, pro-European stance regarding race (2). These historical and sociological characterizations of Dominican race are certainly true for Iliana’s family, as observed previously in the rape scene between Iliana and Marina as black on black violence.

Racial beliefs intersect with sexuality and gender in the moment that Iliana’s sisters ask her about dating at the university and if she has a boyfriend. Perhaps the sister who most evidently expresses internalized racism, Marina asks Iliana if she has obtained a “gorgeous, blue-eyed hunk” (Pérez 38) while at school. The ensuing conversation lends itself to ideas regarding miscegenation in order to improve the race, or *mejorar la raza*³⁶ in Spanish, which persists throughout all of Latin America, but especially in the Dominican Republic. As Torres-Saillant and Hernández describe, the Trujillo era migration policies witnessed the nation “sponsoring preferably European immigration” (33), hoping to make the Dominican population whiter. These policies translated to social norms in which fathers began to seek whiter partners for their daughters, in hopes of improving the family’s social and economic class. Candelario credits this socio-cultural phenomenon to the “Creole cultural system emphasized and institutionalized *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and *blanqueamiento* (whitening) through the *casta* system”

(4). In the novel, when Iliana responds with sarcasm, remarking instead that she would prefer a well-endowed, black boyfriend, this elicits outrage from Marina. Iliana's response challenges Dominican beliefs regarding racial and sexual hierarchies, which would limit her to interacting with only men of a lighter skin color. What is more, this scene reveals the internalized racism that her sister harbors, when Marina insists that she herself is "Hispanic, not black" (Pérez 38) during an argument with Iliana. This serves as another reminder that, unlike the rest of her family, Iliana does not attempt to diminish or hide her blackness and instead perform whiteness. Although she does express self-consciousness regarding her masculine physique, the color of her skin does not appear to make her uncomfortable. What is more, her response to Marina of hoping to find a "big-black-man-with-a-great-big-dick" (38) reveals another way in which she transgresses sexual expectations. Like the women narrators of *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah* detailed in chapter two, here, Iliana utilizes unexpected dialogic humor and sarcasm to subvert her sister's racially motivated questions concerning sexual partners.

One of the largest contributions of *Geographies of Home* to the Dominican American literary scene is its characterization of a lower-middle class family that deals with issues of extreme poverty, and the violence associated with that, which contrasts sharply with the image of middle-class and wealthier families characterized by Julia Álvarez's literary repertoire. Though they are not destitute, Papito and Aurelia have several children which causes them financial strain. Papito is a homeowner, although, as Christina Lam points out in "Trauma and Testimony: Embodied Memory in Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*," they live in a condemned building that "reflects the family's lack of upward mobility and vulnerability" (39). Though many middle to upper class families left the island during the Trujillo dictatorship, Torres-Saillant and Hernández point out that the Balaguer dictatorship, which followed Trujillo, saw

many peasant and working-class families leave for the United States (7). Although the narrative does not explicitly express when Iliana's family came to the states, one can assume that it was part of this wave of lower-class migration that left during the 1970s and 1980s. At every point in the novel, the issue of class intersects with that of gender and race in the discourse of a Dominican and Dominican American identity or nation. Although Iliana aspires to attend a university, earn an education, and improve her own economic situation, her family does not explicitly view her decision as abandonment, though it is implied, as she leaves her family behind. Instead of attending school, Iliana's family encourages her to marry a wealthy man, preferably of a lighter skin color, as a path to social and economic success. Still, Iliana recognizes the value of education and its role in economic mobility that could remove her from Brooklyn. When Iliana comments on their residence in Brooklyn, it is apparent that poverty and a lack of resources frequently dictate the decisions and opportunities, or lack thereof, of her neighbors. She recalls babysitting her nephews and taking them to church, although not for the sake of religious piety, but rather to help them avoid one of the most dangerous distractions of their neighborhood: drug dealing. "Ten-year-olds could make in one day what their parents dreamed of earning in one week" (Pérez 123), Iliana remembers, showing the desperation of her impoverished community. She also notes that hard labor has made her father a physically and emotionally weak man, after the scene in which he physically assaults her. She recalls that his sudden violence was a sign of the "devotion with which he had grown frail working to support a family of fourteen" (321). Iliana recognizes that her father works hard to feed and maintain the family, but she also does not let this distract her and forgive him for inciting violence upon her in the name of the patriarchy. Her descriptions of her family and Brooklyn make connections between poverty and violence within the Dominican American and impoverished New York City

boroughs. However, for Iliana, class mobility and independence within the confines of Brooklyn remain an elusive concept, and for that reason, she chooses to leave it behind for a second time, after her father assaults her, returning back to the university and saying one final goodbye.

Published not long after Pérez's novel, Angie Cruz's *Soledad*, from 2001, tells the story of a young Dominican woman, Soledad, and her troubled relationship with her mother. Taking place in the context of Washington Heights, the reader is again exposed to a less affluent part of New York City, currently recognized for its large population of Dominicans. According to Juanita Heredia in the 2015 article "Afro-Dominican American Women Writers," *Soledad* is the first Dominican novel produced in the diaspora to "locate this historically significant Dominican neighborhood on the literary map of American letters" (205). Similar to Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, Soledad seeks a better life for herself and attends a university, later finding a job in an art gallery in the more bohemian East Village, distancing herself from her family's home and the community discourse surrounding identity. By moving to the lower part of the island of Manhattan, the east side to be exact, she separates from Washington Heights on the northwest side. However, when her mother falls ill, Soledad returns home in order to be her caretaker. Like Iliana, Soledad is an outsider within the context of her family and her community. Her return to Washington Heights is not met with open arms, and she struggles to remain true to her new identity, but also to her familial duties and traditions while caring for her mother. The novel reveals prevailing Dominican American normative constructions of identity, including gender norms, sexual limitations, and racial ideals that are also present in *Geographies of Home*. Soledad, too, confronts these issues with bodily gestures and humor, subverting their power as dominant constructs in her own life as well as that of all Dominican American women. However, Soledad is not the lone transgressor of Dominican American mainstream ideals in the novel;

there a variety of narrative voices, including Soledad, her mother, and her adolescent cousin, Flaca. Each voice presents a different perspective of Dominican American identity and showcases an evolution of this identity throughout each generation. Unlike the matrilineal Caribbean Latina narratives that gained popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s and reinforce normative values, *Soledad* gives voice to women who question and challenge these, indicating an ideological distancing from the home country and its inherited imaginary. Soledad, her mother, and Flaca perform gestures that embody Niebylski's torpid and provocative bodies. Innovative to the Dominican American and the Latina narrative, this work blurs the speech/silence binary, privileging bodily performance, as Cristina Herrera argues in "The Madwoman Speaks: Madness and Motherhood in Angie Cruz's *Soledad*" (2). The women in *Soledad* embody the ideal that Cixous, Irigaray, and Bordo evoke in their work by questioning and rewriting identity on their own bodies. However, just as in *Geographies of Home*, in *Soledad*, the stakes of performance and resistance are even higher because of their intersectional existence as Afro-Dominican women.

Whereas *Geographies of Home* represents the patriarchy through the figures of Papito and the church pastor, *Soledad* lacks a father-like figure to enforce these norms and instead utilizes the senior women of the community, such as Soledad's mother and her aunt, as those who reinforce patriarchal norms. One instance occurs while Soledad is in the grocery store, and she notices older women staring at her from afar. Soledad thinks to herself, "I can almost hear them thinking...How is she ever getting married, she still doesn't know how to pick fruit" (Cruz 52). Soledad projects normative ideals onto these women, predicting what they, as the gatekeepers of Dominican culture, might be contemplating at that moment. One salient example of how the elder women enforce mainstream values throughout the narrative is that of Soledad's

mother, Olivia, who worked as a prostitute in the Dominican Republic, and, after becoming pregnant with Soledad, married one of her suitors, Manolo, in order to save her reputation. Her actions reflect discourses of honor and sexual appropriateness, in which she must marry to save her family's societal reputation. Manolo, after discovering that he is not the biological father of Soledad, becomes resentful and abusive towards both women, as he feels deceived, but also his honor is no longer in question as he has no blood ties to the child. Olivia's predicament encapsulates Audre Lorde's affirmation from "The Erotic as Power" that oppression, to preserve and prolong itself, corrupts any source of power that the oppressed, in this case women, can utilize for change (53). Olivia tries to improve her own situation, but her small power over Manolo is soon overturned. However, Olivia's niece, Flaca, does utilize her erotic power in order to generate change. Contrasting Olivia, whose erotic prowess was controlled by men instead of offering her freedom, Flaca's provocative body (Niebylski 26) becomes a tool to reverse gender and sexual practices. Flaca maintains a purely physical romantic relationship with boy of her age in the community, Pito, to garner attention. Her exaggerated sensual appearance transgresses norms of sexual appropriateness, while her control in the relationship, as she is the one who dominates Pito, subverts patriarchal values that would have the man be in control. When Flaca meets with Pito, dressed provocatively to entice him, he "digs his fingers inside of her in ways she can't do for herself in bed at night" (156), showing that she uses him purely for pleasure. Although she admits enjoyment out of their encounters, Flaca's motivation is to attract attention and incite jealousy in another love interest. In this way, her provocative, excessively sensual body problematizes patriarchal gender and sexual roles as she takes control over both her body and her relationships. What is more, the passage reveals that Flaca does or has attempted to

pleasure herself, which again upsets rules of sexual appropriateness that relegate woman's pleasure unnecessary, as sex is meant for purely reproductive purposes.

In terms of sexuality, there are two different moments in the narrative in which Soledad experiences what would be considered sexual misconduct within the normative Dominican and Dominican American imaginary. After returning to her East Village apartment and roommate, Caramel, they decide to have dinner together. During and after dinner, both consume alcohol in excess which leaves them inebriated, and they sit closely on the futon. Caramel, openly lesbian, begins to flirt with Soledad and sensually touch her chest. In this moment, Soledad's body remains motionless, but her thought processes as the sexual encounter takes place narrate her feelings. Soledad remarks that she "contemplate[s] getting up and away from her to be on the safe side, but [she] decide[s] to stay" (116). Soledad's provocative body in this scene transgresses heteronormative behavioral expectations by allowing Caramel to seduce her. Soledad acknowledges that she has considered engaging in sexual relations with Caramel (116) and, after caressing her for some time, Caramel moves to kiss Soledad, who does not resist her advances. Throughout the entire interaction, Soledad continues to repeat, to the reader, that she doesn't want to stop Caramel and that she is "too curious to move...[and] likes the softness of Caramel's cheek on [her] skin" (117). Soledad's inert body becomes ignited with sexual curiosity at the touch of Caramel, despite her lack of physical correspondence. Still, her provocative body in this scene, allowing itself to be conquered by Caramel, reveals that Soledad does not limit herself to men when it comes to sexual desire and thus explicitly problematizes Dominican and Hispanic Caribbean heterosexual norms. Soledad's body, then, becomes a vehicle of resistance against heterosexual paradigms within the Dominican American and overall Latina community, as Caramel is of Mexican American heritage. However, not all of Soledad's

sexual interactions are carried out via a provocative, engaged body, as observed near the conclusion of the narrative.

Like Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, Soledad is the victim of rape carried out by a family member. In a flashback, Soledad recalls an afternoon in which she, Flaca, and Manolo, take a nap together. As Manolo begins to touch Soledad inappropriately, she remarks that she “pretended to sleep” and was “trying not to breathe” (191). In this scene, Soledad remembers that she remained motionless, without gesture, her body becoming torpid, much like Iliana when she is raped by her own sister. Soledad’s body does not move beneath the physical and societal weight of her father (and thus the patriarchy), the leader of her household, as he rapes her. Her motionless body becomes a medium on which the hypocrisy of her father’s patriarchal values reveals itself: her father, who ideally protects her sexual purity, is the one who defies this principle when she is still at a young age. This parallels Iliana’s altercation with her father, in which he assaults her for suspected sexual impropriety, hypocritically reinforcing patriarchal values. What is more, Soledad’s rape evokes the image of the history of physical and sexual abuse in the Americas, especially against black women. His violation evokes images of the Trujillo regime, in which the virtuousness and innocence of women were celebrated in public, but ultimately desecrated in private. However, her inert body resists the violation at the hands of Manolo, not allowing him to move her neither physically nor emotionally. Like Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, Soledad’s response to this sexual violation is to remain still, torpid, and use her body as a tool to demonstrate that she will not be moved by the perpetrator. In these instances, both Cruz and Pérez utilize their protagonists’ bodies as a means for exposing the hypocrisy of patriarchy and certain aspects of the cultural imaginary. It is through these gripping

images of violence that both Iliana and Soledad problematize the reproduction of identity via the supposed honorable family unit which, behind closed doors, abuses its progeny.

Race, gender, and sexuality intersect throughout *Soledad*, as seen in the lives of Olivia, Soledad, and all of their Washington Heights community. As is the case with Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, clinging to racial discourse that prevailed during the Trujillo regime, Soledad's family and her peers expect her to date light-skinned or white men, in order to improve the family racial makeup. As *Soledad* demonstrates, the Dominican American women in Washington Heights throughout the narrative go to extreme efforts to modify their physical features in such a way that they diminish any traces of African lineage. In her family especially, the women try to lighten their own skin, and praise those with naturally lighter skin tones. Soledad observes an older woman on the subway, headed uptown, who reminds her of her grandmother, wearing "heavy pressed powder three shades lighter than her skin tone" (2). This reinforces the historical legacy in the Dominican Republic regarding anti-blackness and the celebration of Western European traits. In addition to utilizing makeup to whiten their skin, the women in Soledad's neighborhood make efforts to style their hair in a way that is perceived as white, avoiding traditionally African hairstyles. While Soledad is certainly rebellious in terms of her family's expectations, her younger cousin, Flaca, is perhaps even more so, influenced by her multinational friends in Washington Heights. In one scene, Flaca hopes to go have her hair styled in tiny braids with her friend, Caty, who is of Haitian descent and has a very similar physical appearance, including "skin the color of cinnamon sticks" (41). Her alliance with a Haitian woman her age is already transgressive, given the tense history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but a neutral territory in New York City allows this friendship to occur. Soledad's aunt, Flaca's mother, responds by telling her that she cannot have her hair braided, and that she

does not want Flaca “to look like a *cocola*” (41). The term *cocola* is used to denote non-Hispanic people of African descent in the Caribbean, including Haitians, and it can have a derogatory connotation depending on the context. Candelario notes that, within the context of the U.S., where many racial categories are present and skin colors may be similar between one community and the next, Dominican women utilize hair as a marker of racial identity. She remarks that, “while in African-American communities specifically Afrocentric hair styling techniques and styles such as braiding, corn rowing, dread locking, etc., have a committed following, such a parallel does not currently exist in Dominican communities” (23). Even though Flaca and Caty have the same skin tone, by styling her hair in a way that appears more African, Flaca’s mother fears that she will be received poorly among her Dominican community that still retains internalized racisms from the island nation. By not braiding her hair, Flaca would maintain a non-Haitian and non-African appearance that represents the Dominican normative beauty ideal. Still, Flaca, being younger and having grown up in New York, has weakened ties to the Dominican Republic and its cultural imaginary, thus demonstrating a shift toward acceptance and diversity among Dominican Americans. Diaspora allows Flaca to escape anti-black and anti-Haitian sentiment, instead letting her challenge historical memory, a phenomenon discussed by Torres-Saillant and Hernández.³⁷ Along these same lines, while Flaca conceivably has more noticeable African features, Soledad is praised for having beautiful hair by her family. Her grandmother praises her hair, telling Soledad that she has “every woman’s dream. Una melena that will find you a good husband” (Cruz 126). *Melena*, a Spanish word for hair, typically refers to long, thick hair. If there were any doubt that her grandmother’s sentiment was not racial, Soledad remarks that “she runs her hands through my hair which reaffirms to her that there is truly some Spanish blood left in her bloodline” (126). This points to a fantasy heritage, similar to

the Cuban American novels in the previous chapter, in which the family retains strong, visible ties to Spain. Although the texture of Soledad's hair is not explicitly stated, from this context it becomes clear that it is more than likely smooth, straight hair, typical of Europeans, which confirms her grandmother's belief that she is, in fact, white, and not of African heritage. *Soledad* points out that markers of race manifest themselves in diverse ways among the Dominican American community, not limited to skin tone, but also in hair texture and style. Hair and skin, then, can have a direct effect on a Dominican and/or Dominican American woman's ability to marry and, of course, marry for benefit of the family.

However, although there is no evidence of such in the within the story, Soledad's non-Dominican friends and young cousin criticize her for dating seemingly only white men. What is more, because Soledad has left Washington Heights and pursued higher education, her family and the younger generation of Dominicans in this neighborhood, including her cousin, Flaca, feel betrayed by her. Soledad reveals that she is "called a blanquita back home: a sellout, a wannabe white girl" (3) by her community, exposing the lack of trust that her family and friends have for her since leaving the neighborhood. This rejection of Soledad demonstrates the double standard and lack of clarity with regard to the Dominican racial paradigm. While Dominican American woman like Soledad are expected to emulate white, European ideals, they are accused of imitating whiteness if they do something that distinguishes them from their community. This is especially true in the case of Flaca who celebrates her African lineage and uses it to connect to other minority groups in Washington Heights; for Flaca, Soledad's actions and physical distancing demonstrate a rejection of her people. In addition to Flaca, Soledad's Chicana roommate, Caramel, views Soledad as having a racial advantage for being of Dominican descent. When discussing Soledad's job at the art gallery in the East Village, Caramel remarks that

Soledad was offered a position because she is “not brown like [Caramel]” (58). This scene displays the precarious condition of intra-Latina/o subjectivity, in which Dominicans are viewed as being whiter than Mexican Americans, because of their lack of indigenous blood.

Additionally, Caramel, too, accuses Soledad of only dating white men on several occasions. However, when Soledad meets Richie, her eventual love interest who is also Afro-Dominican, she recalls the words of Caramel and says to herself, “I can already hear her telling me. You won’t give Richie a chance ‘cause he ain’t white” (76). It is clear that Caramel’s opinions, imprinted in the subconscious of Soledad, again express an intra-Latina/o subjectivity and awareness of Dominican internalized racism. From a Dominican American standpoint as well as a Latina/o standpoint, it is clear that race and sexuality intersect with gender on many levels in the narrative, including, but certainly not limited to who Soledad chooses to date.

When Soledad meets Richie and recalls Caramel’s would-be opinions about their ill-fated romance due to race, Soledad reveals that it is not the color of his skin that bothers her, but rather his socio-economic class as a resident of Washington Heights. In the same scene that is quoted above Soledad mentions that she does not want to date Richie because “he lives in the hood” (76). At first, her reaction to his flirtation is similar to her reaction in the sexual encounter with Caramel, in which she remains still, rigid, and lost in her own thoughts as Richie attempts to court her. However, her thoughts reveal deep-seeded issues regarding class and race, and how these intersect with gender as a Dominican American woman. Despite her family and her roommate’s accusations, Soledad does not reveal racist thoughts or tendencies, but rather a concern with Richie’s lack of wealth and higher education. However, as is the case for most minority communities in the United States, class and race are inextricably linked, even if Soledad does not explicitly mention race as a concern for dating Richie. From the beginning of the novel,

Soledad expresses shame for being from Washington Heights. When revealing her origins, Soledad initially states that she is from the Upper West Side because she feels that “embroidering the truth about [her] living on the Upper Upper Upper West Side was [her] way of keeping nasty stereotypes of Washington Heights out of people’s minds” (2). It is clear from the very beginning that Soledad seeks to distance herself from this neighborhood, both physically and socially. Still, both Soledad and Flaca demonstrate a shift in Dominican American values, in which concerns about race are shifting to become those of class, and diaspora and transnational flow of ideas are making the Dominican/Haitian divide is becoming less prevalent.

In both *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad*, the escape from one’s community becomes a common thread for each novel’s prominent women characters. Similar to *Memory Mambo* and *How to Leave Hialeah* from the previous chapter, distancing themselves from their family home allows each woman to observe her community from afar, giving her better stance to question and criticize its patriarchal cultural imaginary that would otherwise limit her. Whereas the Cuban American protagonists utilize verbal humor and wit, the Dominican American protagonists in this chapter carry out their protest via the body, at times torpid, provocative, and ill. However, different from their Cuban American counterparts, who ultimately leave at the end of each narrative, Iliana and Soledad’s movement is more of a boomerang effect, returning home and then leaving again. This return home is telling of the evolution of Dominican American identity, in that in order to reconcile generations of anti-African, anti-Haitian sentiment that still persists, one needs to return to her roots in order to question inherited memory that passed from one generation of Dominicans in the U.S. to the next. However, at the end of each novel, Iliana and Soledad come to separate conclusions about the future course of their lives: Iliana chooses to leave forever, and Soledad emotionally reunites with her mother, who she realizes is a victim of

these historical paradigms and cannot be held entirely responsible for her actions. What is more, by living in New York City and being exposed to diverse migrant groups, Soledad, Flaca, and Iliana are exposed to more Dominicans, Haitians, and other Latinos, which perhaps help them to negotiate their identities from a different, more diverse and accepting perspective.³⁸ The permanent departure of Iliana, on the other hand, could be attributed to the strict Seventh Day Adventist doctrine maintained by her father, where she feels that leaving is her only option to escape oppression.

Although their conclusions are different, both *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad* provide new representations of Dominican American identity that consider not only gender, but also sexuality, race, and class. From the perspective of second-generation young women in the diaspora, they show an awareness of the anti-African, anti-Haitian sentiments that govern their parents' and grandparents' cultural imaginary but choose to not let it define their own. What is more, their physical separation from their family and their community symbolically represents a separation from historical memory and inherited cultural paradigms with regard to identity that migrated with the Dominican diaspora. Bodily gestures and sometimes shocking dialogic wit expose the contradictions of the normative Dominican American cultural imaginary, as these narratives simultaneously present and represent an evolving, more diverse image of what it means to be Dominican in the United States.

CHAPTER 4

RADICAL BODIES AND VOICES OF DIFFERENCE: U.S. PUERTO RICAN WOMEN'S HUMOR AND EXCESS IN ERIKA LÓPEZ'S *FLAMING IGUANAS* AND GIANNINA BRASCHI'S *YO-YO BOING!*

“Everyone’s mom had shaved off her eyebrows and drawn thin black lines far above where they used to be. I’d wanted to shave my eyebrows off, too. To be free of their expressions so I could make up my own” (López 147)

In the twentieth century, Puerto Ricans became one of the largest Hispanic Caribbean diasporic groups in the United States, with a long history in cities like New York and Philadelphia, but, despite these deep roots, they have also been victim to harsh discriminatory practices from both in and outside of the U.S. Latino community. After acquiring the territory in 1898, the island nation passed through a series of different political denominations, none of which granted Puerto Rico full autonomy. The limited economy, due in large part to U.S. governmental regulations and programs that exploit Puerto Rican resources for external prosperity, has forced many to relocate to the mainland United States and seek economic opportunity. As the United States joined the fight in World War I and desperately needed soldiers on the ground, citizenship was extended to Puerto Ricans in 1917 with the passage of the Jones Act, which required them to register for Selective Service for the U.S. Armed Forces. After the war, Puerto Ricans relocated in mass to the mainland U.S. and began to settle in places like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia for economic reasons. However, many Puerto Rican veterans were not treated with a war hero’s welcome and faced discrimination while searching for housing, employment, and other public services.

Still, while the marginalization that Puerto Ricans experienced from a society that favored Anglo American values caused conflict, many Puerto Ricans also felt prejudices from within the community itself. The principles that shaped the Puerto Rican cultural imaginary on

the island were brought to the mainland U.S. and helped establish a sense of community and cultural identity for some but not all. Passed down from generation to generation, these beliefs constructed an idea of what it meant to be Puerto Rican in the U.S. and on the mainland, and were reinforced in community activity and cultural production. Much like their Hispanic Caribbean counterparts in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, patriarchal ideology dominated social structures and practices while European ancestry and white skin was fetishized, despite a remarkable presence of African descendants on the island. The ideal Puerto Rican woman, then, was submissive to her husband, both sexually and psychologically, white, and, if possible, of a higher social class. Those who did not fit this archetype were cast to the margins of society both on the island and in the mainland.

In terms of cultural production, Puerto Rican women's voices were repressed for many decades, as men dominated the art, music, and literary worlds. Women who appeared in these mediums of production represented and reinforced normative cultural values, creating a homogenous image of Puerto Rican women and, by extension, the diasporic community. Voices of difference among Puerto Rican society and letters could be found in Julia de Burgos, Luisa Capetillo, and Mercedes Solá, whose essays and works of poetry expressed disagreement and dissatisfaction with patriarchal practices. With the exception of De Burgos, their works did not address differences of race, class, or language, representing a first-world version of feminism. These early Puerto Rican feminists "failed to include in their vision of Puerto Rican culture any serious consideration of Puerto Rico's complex racial history. This 'silence,' consequently, helped to perpetuate the racial/social hierarchies in which blacks and their contributions to Puerto Rican culture were – and sometimes still are – seen as inferior to the Spanish and 'white' heritage" (Roy-Féquièrre 52). However, with the advent of the civil rights movement in the

1960s, a paradigm shift occurred in the mainland U.S. and more women, especially women of color, began writing about their experiences as marginalized members of North American society. Within the Puerto Rican community, Nicholasa Mohr wrote about the difficulties of growing up as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman in New York, earning recognition for her works like 1973's *Nilda* and 1975's *El Bronx Remembered*. Later, in the early 1990s, more Puerto Rican women published literary works that are now considered canonical Latina narratives, including Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer, whose pivotal coming-of-age novels, *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, respectively, detailed the painful process of living between the island and the mainland, both geographically and culturally. Only a few years later, another paradigm shift would take place that gave voice to women of differing sexualities, Afro-Puerto Rican identity, and linguistic proclivities including code-switching. In the late 1990s, narratives of difference from the Puerto Rican mainland community began to surface, exposing intra-community prejudices, and arguing in favor of a diverse construction of Puerto Rican identity. These literary works, such as those from Luz María Umpierre, Giannina Braschi, and Erika López, show women who do not fit the ideal image of *puertorriqueñidad* inherited from the colonial era and, instead, resist normative categorization that attempts to define and oppress them.

These works from López and Braschi, *Flaming Iguanas: An All-Girl Road Novel Thing* and *Yo-Yo Boing!*, respectively, give voice to the most marginalized sectors of the Puerto Rican diasporic, or U.S. Puerto Rican community, as I will refer to the Puerto Ricans who reside primarily in the mainland United States.³⁹ Each work features a protagonist in dialogue with the island's cultural imaginary that seeks to limit her both as a woman and as a Latina. While their voices convey humor in the face of discrimination, their bodies also become sites of narrative

that express a rejection of the elite echelons of both Puerto Rico and the United States and their values. Their laughter and use of humor throughout each narrative evoke Helénè Cixous' *Laugh of the Medusa* and the call to women to write their own life experiences in order to obtain textual verisimilitude. In addition to the comical quality of their dialogues, the role that the body plays in each work dialogues with Niebylski's study on the revolutionary possibilities of the women's body in Latin American women's literature. These texts reflect what Niebylski has defined as incontinent, sexually excessive, and entropic bodies. To summarize her description of these bodies, the (1) incontinent body cannot be contained by the rules of etiquette or good manners, the (2) sexually excessive body expresses its right to pleasure to an extreme, and (3) the entropic body mediates urban and diasporic spaces, such as New York City, while performing identity as transnational or transitional (Niebylski 26). This chapter will highlight these moments of humored and bodily resistance within both *Flaming Iguanas* and *Yo-Yo Boing!* in an attempt to demonstrate their role within the representation and contestation of U.S. Puerto Rican identity via literary and/or cultural production. What is more, an examination of the format of each work serves as a microstructure of their revolutionary potential, as each diverts from canonical tradition and structure that is typical of narrative prose.

As in Cuba and in the Dominican Republic, gender roles in Puerto Rico have historically been determined by the conservative doctrine of the Catholic Church and the patriarchy that have dominated the Hispanic Caribbean cultural imagination since the colonial age. In general, women are expected to maintain a domestic presence as mothers and nurturers in the home, while men work outside of the home and financially provide for the family. A woman's sexual purity is as important as any of her other qualities and, more importantly, represents a family's honor and societal position. In addition to questions of class, race plays an important factor in

determining a woman's social positioning. Racial miscegenation is discouraged, and the phenomenon of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening, dominates the sexual and social imaginary.⁴⁰ Like other Hispanic Caribbean nations, despite progress in the realms of education and civil rights, historical memory as inherited by the colonial era still places women in a subordinate position to men. This subordination is two-fold for women of color, who, often the descendants of slaves, were victims of a brutal plantation system that saw them stripped of any rights as individuals. Although slavery was abolished on the island in 1873, their social, economic, and cultural disenfranchisement made the alienating social and psychological effects of slavery continue until the present day.⁴¹

However, as Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the United States in 1898 after the Cuban-Spanish-American War, the growing influence of *el norte* was not relegated to solely governmental realms, but also perceptions of gender and women's reproductive rights. After the passage of the Jones Act in 1917, Puerto Ricans began travelling freely between the island and the mainland United States for educational and economic opportunity, particularly to New York and other Atlantic coastal cities. This back and forth movement allowed for the exchange of both commercial goods and cultural beliefs between the urban metropolis and, in that era, the still predominantly rural island. For women, it meant a taste of life in the big city, exposed to many new ways of life and more opportunities outside of the home as members of a growing workforce, especially during World War II. The progress that Puerto Rican women experienced upon relocating to the mainland U.S. was not always met with open arms both in the *colonia*, the predominantly Puerto Rican area of New York, and on the island. As Lorrin Thomas points out, many men of Puerto Rican descent, some academic scholars, wrote into newspapers and other media outlets in cities like New York as a precautionary method, warning about the "moral

perils” (33) that virtuous Puerto Rican women faced in diaspora. Disguised as concern for their cultural identity as Puerto Rican women becoming confused with that of the liberal *americana*,⁴² this resulted in a cultural push-back in migratory hubs of Puerto Ricans, cities like New York in particular, where conservative values regained strength and women were again expected to be chaste and virtuous according to the church doctrine.

This preoccupation for the liberated Puerto Rican women in the mainland reflects an ideological shift on the island as well. Shortly before the onset of World War II, the idea of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, or great Puerto Rican family, was promoted both on the island and in the diaspora as a foundational element of identity. Much of the Puerto Rican belief system regarding identity that exists today can be traced back to the myth of *la gran familia* that surged during the literary phenomenon known as *la generación del treinta*, or the generation of 1930. Fearing a cultural take-over by the United States, these writers, including Antonio S. Pedreira, famous for his narrative about the Puerto Rican condition, *Insularismo*, published in 1934, sought to unify the island through a discourse that discouraged racial mixing, in the hopes of creating a homogenous, white nation that could resist North American influences (Roy-Féquièrre 14). At its core, the idea of *la gran familia* was to promote a strong sense of national unity and identity in the wake of growing American influence after the Cuban-Spanish-American War. However, as Marisel Moreno points out in *Family Matters: Puerto Rican Authors on the Island and the Mainland*, the belief in *la gran familia* homogenized the Puerto Rican experience and left little room for marginalized voices belonging to women and Puerto Ricans of color (2-4). What is more, Moreno underscores the inherent racism in works like *Insularismo*, which discounts the black experience in Puerto Rico and relies on positivist thinking characteristic of that time period. The inherent gender and racial discrimination that seeds itself in *la gran familia*

could be partly responsible for the lack of diverse voices from the Puerto Rican canon for the first half of the twentieth century. Although now regarded as an iconic Puerto Rican poet, Julia de Burgos, for example, was largely disregarded as a serious author in her lifetime, perhaps due to her gender and her racial composition, and only gained fame posthumously. Even De Burgos, though, as Magali Roy-Féquièrè has pointed out, was unable to escape racist paradigms that infiltrated her poetry and essays.

Still, Puerto Rican cultural production on the island and in the mainland United States saw a surge of women writers in the late 1970s and continuing to the present day, broaching topics of gender and racial discrimination, sexual oppression, and class struggles. Writers like Rosario Ferré and Ana Lydia Vega wrote about both physical and psychological violence as it affects Puerto Rican women during the literary and market phenomenon known as the *Posboom*, which brought women's voices and struggles to the forefront. From the United States, Nicholasa Mohr and Aurora Levins Morales brought those same issues to light, with an emphasis on diaspora and growing up as a minority in New York and California. Levins Morales participated in the collection *This Bridge Called My Back* with Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa and has since been considered a canonical third-world feminist since coming to the United States. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer became synonymous with the Puerto Rican women's diaspora narrative, writing from both New York and New Jersey, and their experiences physically and emotionally moving between those states and the island. However, this is not to assume that Puerto Rican writers on the island and in the U.S. are regarded equally; in academia, there has been a strong ideological rift between writers on the island and those in diaspora, who are often regarded as less Puerto Rican and/or more American. One of the key issues of this debate is language: many Puerto Rican writers in the U.S. write

primarily in English, while those on the island fervently utilize Spanish as an affirmation of identity. Moreno attempts to bridge this gap between Puerto Rican writers both here and there by highlighting the many literary contact zones, particularly via the manifestation of *la gran familia* in the historical memory of each group.

The diasporic Puerto Rican experience has its roots in the historical processes that shaped Puerto Rican identity on the island. Cultural concepts such as *la gran familia* continue in the diaspora and affect the experience of individuals within the U.S. Puerto Rican community. However, as Moreno and many others point out, the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative highlights the class struggles that accompany living as a minority that island narratives lack. The minority experience is an important element in works by Nuyorican writers and, of course, in the narratives produced by Ortiz Cofer and Santiago in the 1980s and 1990s. These works, now considered iconic Latina and/or U.S. Puerto Rican literary pieces, also emphasize issues of gender and sexuality within the Puerto Rican community from the perspective of women. Their response to *la gran familia* and its inherent prejudices is a jumping-off point for the more radical narratives that would follow in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Afro-Puerto Rican authors in the U.S. and those whose sexuality finds itself outside of the boundaries of a heterosexual binary. Turning the myth of *la gran familia* on its head and opening a revolutionary dialogue on intersectional U.S. Puerto Rican identity, Erika López and Giannina Braschi address issues of gender, sexuality, race, class, and language in an innovative way that begs a deeper questioning of these tropes of the Puerto Rican cultural imaginary.

Taking into account cultural norms on the island and in the diaspora, the narratives of focus in this chapter will write against the grain of hegemonic Puerto Rican ideology, instead exposing the experience of U.S.-based Puerto Rican women from different economic classes,

racial backgrounds, and sexual orientations. Both *Flaming Iguanas* and *Yo-Yo Boing!* criticize the cultural imaginary that excludes their characters from the mainstream, utilizing humor and the body as platforms to expose hypocrisy and discrimination within the Puerto Rican diasporic community. Grounded in Niebylski's ideas of the incontinent, sexually excessive, and entropic bodies as areas of resistance in Latin American women's literature, this chapter seeks to highlight the confrontation of these narratives with the cultural models and identities imposed upon them.

Published in 1997, *Flaming Iguanas* is the first of a trilogy about the life of fictional character Tomato Rodríguez, written and illustrated by Erika López. A former cartoonist for *The Washington Post*, López incorporates her artistic background in the illustrations present throughout *Flaming Iguanas*. In general, the text presents itself as a hybrid work, incorporating visual elements of the graphic novel along with a style of prose that is characteristic of the traditional narrative. However, the topics that López broaches could be considered grotesque, and the physical appearance of the novel itself pushes the boundaries of literary form. Instead of illustrating the images in the novel, however, López utilizes antique rubber stamps from the 1940s and 50s and then draws over them to achieve the desired image. At first sight, *Flaming Iguanas* is a coming-of-age tale about Jolene Rodríguez, alias "Tomato," as she embarks on a cross-country road trip and navigates both her identity and sexuality. Characterized as "chick lit" by some, *Flaming Iguanas* broaches issues of intersectionality that have otherwise been absent from this genre,⁴³ as Alexandra Ganser points out in "'Lap Dancing for Mommy': Queer Intermediality, Chick Lit, and Trans-Generational Feminist Mediation in Erika López's Illustrated Narratives." However, the novel touches on many issues of identity apart from sexuality, including language, race, and class. Her mother is of German descent, while her father,

who abandoned the family while she was young to move to California, is Afro-Puerto Rican. Tomato grows up in Philadelphia, a hub for Puerto Ricans coming to the mainland United States after World War II.⁴⁴ Her mother is homosexual, living almost platonically with her partner, while Tomato's sister's sexuality is not detailed. Like the other narratives analyzed in this study, leaving becomes a prominent theme in *Flaming Iguanas*, not just in a physical sense, but also in terms of an ideological departure from normative versions of U.S. Puerto Rican identity.

While the surface theme of the novel is Tomato's journey cross-country on her antique motorcycle, she also addresses issues of gender and sexuality as limiting and, at times, liberating factors along the way. Initially, she identifies herself as bisexual, but at the end of the novel and at the end of her journey, Tomato discovers that her sexuality cannot be labeled. To utilize the terminology that Niebylski has provided regarding the woman's body, Tomato is sexually excessive throughout the novel, demonstrating a criticism of the patriarchy that seeks to reduce women's sexuality to reproductive purposes only. She also provides graphic descriptions of bodily fluids such as blood and urine, and frequently enters a discourse that approaches the limits of appropriateness and the grotesque. In addition to her dialogue regarding sexuality, Tomato also speaks frankly about racial discrimination that she and her family experience, attempting to negotiate her racial and ethnic identity as an Afro-Puerto Rican-German-American. Intersecting with her ethnicity growing up as a minority in Philadelphia, Tomato sneaks in commentary regarding economic and social class, noting her family's financial hardship while depending on government social welfare problems to survive. While these issues are not exclusive to Tomato, many of these elements manifest themselves in U.S. Puerto Rican literature, the manner in which she approaches them is unique. Hidden behind humor and otherwise grotesque language, Tomato addresses serious issues within the U.S. Puerto Rican community and its construction of identity

and diasporic nation. As quoted in Niebylski's study on humor, and appropriately related to this graphic road novel, eighteenth-century philosopher George Meredith stated in "An Essay on Comedy" that "where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty...there...pure comedy flourishes" (20). What is more, López's use of illustrations pushes the boundaries of what is considered literary, but upon closer analysis, they can be considered criticism of the literary canon and academia overall as being too rigid and narrow-minded.

López begins her dialogue with gender and sexuality from the very first page of the novel, comically affirming that on her route she will go "down the crack of Tennessee's ass. Bite a Grand Teton and goose Amarillo, Texas" (López 1). She strategically names certain humorous locations, such as Grand Teton, which mimics the Spanish augmentative word for a large breast, *teta*, affirming her ambiguous sexuality from the beginning as she jokes about biting it.

Unimpressed by the supposedly liberal cross-country narratives from male authors like Kerouac, Tomato criticizes their less-than progressive treatment of women as purely domestic creatures and decides to create on her own "chick" road novel. Throughout her journey, she reflects on the differences between her own journey and those of the men before her due to her gender. In her 2003 dissertation about women's road novels, Jessica Enevold argues that Tomato's journey and attitude demonstrate that "women have an equal right to the road" (144) which can be extended to other facets of life. However, Tomato is also uniquely aware of the vulnerability of women on the road, especially women of color. Early on, Tomato realizes that she must plan her trip and choose refueling and stopping points very carefully to protect herself. She is conscious of her vulnerability as a woman when she remarks, "I talk to anybody. *I forget I'm a girl*, and I'll go out with some truckdriver I met on the side of the road and have a few beers" (López 112, my emphasis). Tomato is aware of the dangers that she faces on the road and the potential violence

that could arise in any situation that forces her to stop moving. What is more, her statement that I have emphasized in italics shows that this goes against her natural instincts in the city to speak and act freely and highlights the stigma of gender danger and violence on the road. This also parallels the gender violence present in the Dominican American novels from chapter three, *Geographies of Home* and *Soledad*, although here it takes place outside of the home and in the public sphere of the road.

In her moments of self-reflection on the highway, Tomato recalls fluctuations and confusion between who she truly is and who society expects her to be, both in terms of the Anglo American hegemony and the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York. While she criticizes Kerouac and other implicitly misogynist writers, she remembers the efforts that she made to submit to a boyfriend with similar patriarchal values. However, it is her use of humor in remembering this time that exposes the opposition of this moment with her current journey. With an ex-boyfriend, she remembers, “I wanted to wear white cotton dresses, pick daisies in a field, sing heterosexual folk songs to every cow” (López 86). Later, she reflects on this situation, noting, “I was nuts, man. I was close to having a fucking garden for this guy. Yeah, I would’ve worn an apron, made bread, and popped out kids like tiny, shiny Life Savers” (150). The use of humor and ridiculousness stifles the seriousness of her reflection that reveals hegemonic gender norms that place women within the home and in a position relegated to reproduction. Her style of humor reflects that of *camp*, a style theorized by Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp.” As Niebyski cites in her work, Sontag defines camp as humor that attempts to “‘denaturalize’ the ‘normal’ sense of whatever situations or characters it (re)presents, reducing them to farcical imitations of the original” (129). Tomato’s camp characterization of her previous relationships problematizes the institution of marriage, revealing its mass appeal like that of objects of

consumer culture and its inherent falsity. This connection to mass culture is perhaps best exposed when she states, “I want the kid, the folding stroller. Please, let me stand forever in a line with my expensive offspring at Disney World” (López 28). Though outwardly expressing a desire to have children, her statement underlines the superficiality of child-rearing in American culture, which requires expensive, complicated apparatuses for transporting children and costly vacation destinations. Tomato’s journey further complicates marriage, as Sara Cooper reveals in “Burning Down the Canon: Queer Family and Queer Text in *Flaming Iguanas*,” when she recalls a boyfriend who suggested a shot-gun wedding and her on-the-road sexual escapade with two married men at a rest stop, actions which “subvert the sanctity of the idea of traditional marriage” (10). Tomato’s thought processes and journey, then, upset the image of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* and the hegemonic Anglo American social norms that expect marriage, reproduction, and female domesticity.

In addition to camp characterizations of domesticated married life, her critical vision of the patriarchy primarily manifests itself in memories of her father, who abandoned the family when Tomato was young. He is portrayed as an abusive, sexually excessive, and emotionally detached figure. He is physically abusive toward his daughters, as seen when Tomato recalls a moment in which she and her sister visit and stay with him. Late one night, her father physically assaults seven-year-old Elena, Tomato’s sister, for not washing her hair. She states, “Elena faked her evening shower and wet the top of her curly hair. When she came into the living room to say good night, he saw all this dry hair around her head and quietly dragged her back into the bathroom and punched her out against the tile wall for faking” (68). Although reasons for his discontent are not verbally expressed, this scene represents a transgression on the part of Elena for, at its core, disobeying her father. To reprimand her, he becomes violent, and instead of

verbally correcting the undesired behavior, imparts excessive physical abuse. What is more, given Tomato's description of Elena's curly hair, given their Afro-Puerto Rican heritage, this violence does not limit itself to the boundaries of gender, also involving paradigms of race. Paralleling the violence that Iliana experiences at the hands of her father in *Geographies of Home*, here we are witness to another level of violence, that which occurs on the black female body, and symbolizes the violence of the state against women. As Cooper states in her article, the vision that Tomato provides of a patriarchal father-figure is not one that merits praise nor emulates *la gran familia* (11). Moreover, as a professor, her father has a reputation for sleeping with his students which, although their ages are not revealed, inspires images of sexual predation and excess. His sexual excess is further demonstrated when he begins a sex-toy business with his lesbian partner, Hodie. Overall, Tomato and Elena's father is far from the image of the heroic, benevolent father as described in the myth of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, who imparts control upon the women in his family via non-violent means. In this sense, she not only criticizes the institution of marriage, but also the Western patriarchal family that imparts violence and oppression upon women's bodies and, especially, women of color.

In addition to criticizing heterosexual practices, Tomato also criticizes stereotypes of women's non-heterosexual activities through camp, showing that her sexuality is, in fact, somewhere on the spectrum and not reinforcing any binary. After a sexual encounter with Hodie, her father's business partner, Tomato observes, "to my relief, the next morning I didn't feel like a member of a lesbian gang. I didn't feel this urge to subscribe to lesbian magazines, wear flannel shirts, wave DOWN WITH THE PATRIARCHY signs in the air, or watch bad lesbian movies" (251). In this passage, she reveals that, despite having a homosexual experience, Tomato remains herself, which is far from the exaggerated image of what society expects of a

lesbian. As such, Tomato's camp-laden response denaturalizes the lesbian experience, going against the grain of societal expectations, and problematizes both the image of lesbians and labels regarding sexual orientation in general. Along the lines of what Ganser mentions, López's work parodies the many stereotypes of women (221), which include, as we have seen here, both the homemaker and the lesbian. Ganser also points out that Tomato ultimately is undecided regarding her sexual orientation (229), but I would argue that she, instead, makes a conscious decision to not align herself with any label of sexuality. Her actions and statements regarding her sexual orientation reflect José Esteban Muñoz's idea of *disidentification*, in which she does not align herself with any side, neither bisexual, hetero nor homosexual, and instead chooses to disidentify with these labels. Cooper also agrees with this assessment, noting that, as disidentification does not shy away from historical traumas, Tomato, too, embraces her physically and emotionally turbulent past.⁴⁵ Instead, Tomato's use of humor and camp challenges these sexual classifications that simultaneously oppress women. Rather than being labeled as hetero or homosexual, Tomato is simply a sexual being, comfortable in her non-normative sexual needs and desires. This image of her as a sexual being, not necessarily on either side of the spectrum, is reinforced when she recalls a night on the road in which she could not find appropriate lodging. Armed with only a tent to sleep in, she worries about her own privacy. She remarks, "maybe I could actually have some privacy and masturbate tonight and not see myself in court going 'You're right. It's all my fault. Yeah, I guess I was raped because he heard me masturbating alone in my tent'" (López 193). She does not explain nor apologize for her sexuality and desire to pleasure herself, despite its implications for the patriarchy, and thus reflects Enevold's thoughts on "re-scripting" (12) gender roles in the novel. Whereas men are expected to be sexually voracious characters, Tomato shows that her sexual tendencies are not

limited to reproductive purposes and that women, too, can seek pleasure without the company of a man. Sarcastically, she also reveals the danger of rape culture of both Latino and Anglo culture, in which a sexual woman tempts uncontrollable men. Her imagined court scene reveals the skepticism that society places on women's innocence in rape cases, and the victim blaming associated with it. Just as her memories, thoughts, and practices reveal criticisms of gender and sexual norms and violence, Tomato's journey also highlights struggles with race, class, and language as a Latina woman of color.

Tomato's oscillation on the spectrum of sexuality is not the only way in which she disidentifies: she also falls between practices of Anglo and Latina identity throughout her journey, in terms of race and language as well. The use of camp and excessive humor continues in Tomato's criticism of racism and racial stratification in her community. At times, she longs to be one or the other, either white or black, but there are other moments when she realizes that she is also both and none, given the racial binary in the United States that does not distinguish different shades of color like in Latin America. Tomato describes her own skin color as "kind of a gray brown" (López 54), also noting that her father had dark skin, while her mother was very pale. She sometimes demonstrates a self-conscious attitude and potential fluidity with regard to her racial and ethnic ambiguity, expressing, "sometimes I want to be so black, my hair in skinny long braids, that black guys nod and say 'hey, sister' when they pass me by in the street. /I want the story, the rhythm, the myths that come with the color" (29). Tomato passes through moments in which she desires to be immediately identifiable in terms of her race, noting different cultural markers that would make her appear more African American instead of white or mixed. However, this quote also shows that she gives into the Anglo imaginary that projects a specific history and culture, referring stereotypes about the African and African American community. In

other instances, she highlights the confusion of being mixed race, stating, “I don’t feel white, gay, bisexual, black, or like a brokenhearted Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*, but sometimes I feel like all of them. Sometimes I feel so white I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK, experience the brotherhood and simplicity of opinions” (28). Laced with camp humor, Tomato reveals the constant in-between feeling that she has as a woman whose parents belong to vastly different racial groups. Her descriptions of the forlorn Puerto Rican commonly portrayed in musicals, along with the white supremacist Anglo, expose common extremes and myths associated with each racial group that are portrayed in popular culture. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes discusses the racialization of López as much as Tomato, whose experiences of being Puerto Rican or Latina are characterized not by growing up in a Puerto Rican household, due to an absent father, but rather by being a racial other and being exposed to popular Latino/a culture and stereotypes in the United States.⁴⁶ However, her use of these exaggerated stereotypes is characteristic of camp humor, and thus also serves to criticize these extreme and idealistic visions of Puerto Rican culture in the States. Her racial composition also intersects with her language capabilities or non-abilities, marking another area of insecurity for Tomato. Due to her Puerto Rican or ambiguous Hispanic phenotype, people stereotype her as a Spanish speaker and are dismayed when she cannot communicate in the language. She reveals, “I wish I was born speaking Spanish so I could sound like I look without curly-hair apologies” (29). Her absent father and present but German mother result in an English-only environment, leaving Tomato with desires to connect to her Puerto Rican side. In order to do so, she creates an imaginary guardian angel named after a popular banana brand, Chiquita, which was consequently “the only Spanish word [she] knew” (108). Again, she relies on popular culture and stereotypes to construct her identity and, in turn, reveal fallacies with the constructed image of Latino/a identity

in the States. Ironically, bananas harvested by the Chiquita company are primarily Central American, not Puerto Rican, again exposing another layer of the myth of *Latinidad* in which a young Tomato believes. What is more, the image of Miss Chiquita derives from Carmen Miranda, the popular 1940s Brazilian actress who was characterized as the Latin Bombshell and, though portraying Cuban, Argentinean and other Hispanic American characters that were shaped by Hollywood's gaze, often spoke Portuguese in her films, creating an unrealistic and confusing representation of Latin American identity. The colored cover image of *Flaming Iguanas* reveals an homage to Carmen Miranda/Miss Chiquita and presumably represents Tomato, leaning against her motorcycle as she embarks on her journey. As Ganser discusses, the cover image "lends color both to the black-and-white picture of Miranda's filmic appearances and the stereotypical, black-and-white image of the Latina woman" (232). Her ironic use of a popular Latino cultural icon like Miranda functions as a criticism of the black-or-white racial binary in the U.S. that sees Latinos as either white or black, and leaves no room for those who may fall in-between. Overall, young Tomato's faith in her guardian angel, Chiquita, exposes a long tradition of cultural stereotyping and homogenization of Latino and Latin American culture in the United States.

Despite her racial ambiguity, though, as La Fountain-Stokes indicates, Tomato does experience discrimination due to her growing up in a racist society. She recalls moments when people mistake her darker skin for a tan, due to having other "white" features, or treat her differently for not having light, white skin. She remarks that her "nose is not flat enough to offend/and not pointy enough to cut the glass ceiling" (López 28). Though she uses camp humor to describe this phenomenon, noting that she is a "child of an AT&T café ole telephone commercial future" (28), her statement reveals the conflict that she faces as a mixed-race

woman: her physical features are not “black” enough at times, but also not sufficiently “white” to allow her to escape systemic racism both in and outside of the Latino community. Tomato also describes moments from her childhood in which she experienced racism, when she and her sister were discriminated against during a baking contest. She describes that people “looked at us like we were leftovers from some liberal free-love moment in the sixties” (57). In this statement, Tomato refers to the rise in sexual liberation and racial mixing that the United States witnessed in the 1960s during and after the Civil Rights movement. While on her journey, these feelings of racial otherness persist, especially as she passes through rural America and predominantly white towns. In one neighborhood with expensive-looking homes, she thinks, “I felt this was the kind of neighborhood that’d lynch me for bringing down the property values” (95), and she quickly leaves. Though her thought process is humorous and perhaps hyperbolic, it reveals a long history of racism and racial segregation that persist in United States’ ideology, where predominantly white neighborhoods strive to retain their “whiteness” and, therefore, social and economic value. It also alludes to a legacy of violence upon black bodies in the states that continued long after the abolition of slavery. Tomato’s journey, then, is not only dangerous for her in terms of gender, but also, as this moment reveals, in terms of her mixed racial composition that paints her as a non-white in the States. Like the protagonists of the Cuban American and Dominican American narratives in chapters two and three, respectively, Tomato experiences racism from outside of the Latino community as well as within, best encapsulated by her lack of ability to speak Spanish. The discrimination and otherness that she experiences is not due solely to her darker skin and sexual orientation, but also her marginal economic class and minimal Spanish.

As Ganser points out, López’s work is both post-feminist and third-wave feminist, demonstrating the need to reevaluate important second and third wave feminist politics while

also accounting for a lack of diversity in the feminist movement in general (224). Though she accounts for differences of sexuality and race, her contribution, much like the contribution of all of the authors in this project, is the incorporation of economic class within Latino society as an element of intersectionality. *Flaming Iguanas*, in its camp and humorous style, details the plight of the disenfranchised Puerto Rican working class living in Philadelphia, characterized by Tomato, her family, and her acquaintances. Tomato jokes about depending on federal welfare programs to buy food and clothing, but behind the humor are serious concerns for lower-class Puerto Ricans and, by extension, all non-normative Latinos, and wage gaps that do not allow for economic and social ascension. While on her journey, Tomato takes issue with white Anglo American youth who, as she demonstrates, possess economic and social privilege and a lack of knowledge about the lower-class experience. In one instance, she recalls an angry group of well-groomed, young white men who have repaid their student loans. Her reaction is to “puke up all the strawberries [she] bought with the last of America’s food stamps into their lap” (López 61). Here, she reveals the hypocrisy of their angst, exposing their racial and economic privilege via a well-kept physical appearance and financial freedom that she does not possess. Her statement, while representative of the incontinent body that Niebylski characterizes, exposes the disconnect between those who are forced to depend on social welfare programs like food stamps in order to meet basic needs, and those who are privileged enough to not require them. At the same time, the desire to vomit on them represents an act of resistance and rebellion, which would force these privileged men to confront her social and economic reality. Later, while in San Francisco, Tomato observes a group of “white kids in dreadlocks pretend they were disadvantaged artists with groundbreaking ideas. But their posture and teeth were too straight and white to fool anyone who’s accepted donated bras in junior high” (240). Again, she contrasts her disadvantaged

upbringing with the white privileged youth in the States, who practice cultural appropriation to rebel against their own community. The contrast of her receiving donated clothing as a youth and their childhood that included quality health and dental care reveals another area of disconnect between the Anglo and Latino communities in the States. However, Tomato does not limit herself to only relating the economic struggles of her own family, but also extends this to other Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia. In one instance, she recalls a woman named Julie, who “had false teeth by the time she was twenty. She went to clubs a lot and said men loved it because she could take her teeth out when she gave guys blow jobs/Said she could do cool things with gums, as long as it was in the dark” (157). Among the many issues that this description exposes is the problem of economic class that is revealed by Julie’s poor dental hygiene, contrasting with the perfect teeth of the white men in dreadlocks. At a young age, she is forced to utilize dentures, revealing what is most likely a lack of attention to her oral health. What is more, Tomato’s description also points out the sexual exploitation that Julie experiences at the hands of her clients, who force her to perform sexual service in the darkness. By performing in the dark and out of the public eye, Julie’s men protect their status and reputation that would otherwise be damaged by involving themselves with a woman of lower economic and social class. Julie represents one sector of the lower-class Puerto Rican community, simultaneously marginalized and exploited by the privileged residents of Philadelphia. Tomato’s journey, then, not only reveals discrepancies of gender, sexuality, and race, but also demands for a reexamination of economic class privilege or lack of privilege that also plagues members from within the Puerto Rican and Latino community in the States.

For its confrontational approach to exposing issues of gender, sexuality, race, and class, *Flaming Iguanas* innovates and incites a new approach to Puerto Rican and Latina identities and

cultural production itself. Enevold notes Tomato's constant demands to be represented in popular culture, noting an absence of role models for her as she grew up, both in terms of her sexuality and mixed racial composition.⁴⁷ Her lack of representation in terms of cultural production and overall absence from the Puerto Rican imaginary as a woman of color and differing sexual and class backgrounds reflect the demands of Anzaldúa in terms of third-world and border feminism. Tomato's thought processes and experiences evoke a "new mestiza consciousness" by recognizing all parts of her identity and not wanting to assimilate. Ganser remarks that, "like the new mestiza, Tomato cannot (and does not want to) be located fully in the 'here' or 'there' of the border zones and transcends dualistic relations" (233). This is certainly true, as the narrative places Tomato in a constant in-between, whether in terms of her sexual orientation, race, or even her identity as U.S. Puerto Rican. However, her "new mestiza consciousness" also applies to López's overall narrative project that combines written prose with rubber stamp illustrations, giving it a graphic novel-like appearance. The vintage stamps utilized by López are supplemented by text that she adds, giving dialogue to the otherwise silent stamp figures that represent normative, mid-twentieth century Anglo American ideals. As Cooper points out, this "visual disruption represents the disruption of conventional female self-representation" (7). This is certainly so, and one could add that it also presents a disruption of conventional Latina self-representation that has often been portrayed in cultural production as whiter and sexually subservient. *Flaming Iguanas* makes a clear statement regarding the characterization of U.S. Puerto Rican and Latina identity, along with the literary canon and policing of bodies as much as genres. López's work demands not only a second look at how identity is constructed, but also what we consider literary.

Similarly, Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* also pokes fun at academia and rigid, sometimes elitist, requirements concerning the literary and scholarly canon. Published in 1998, Giannina Braschi's breakout novel pushes the boundaries of language, narrative form, and the grotesque. Though it does not include illustrations like López's work, it contains a constant dialogue with, at times, indistinguishable voices that blur the lines between genders and narrative genres. As Sarah de Mojica argues, *Yo-Yo Boing!* destabilizes literary genres, o *géneros* in Spanish (198). The double meaning of *géneros* as both genre and gender is not coincidental, as the narrative disrupts traditional notions of gender roles as well. This destabilization also intersects with Caminero-Santangelo's affirmation that the incoherence of dialogue represents a "(dis)ability to produce meaning - that is, to produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society" (11). Braschi's difficult structure is not accidental and represents an effort to disrupt normative formations of meaning, which extend not only to linguistic practices but also constructions of identity. The novel is divided into three parts, with the first and third being entirely in Spanish, and the second filled with a constantly code-switching dialogue and moments of memory flashback only indicated by the text being italicized. More so in *Yo-Yo Boing!* than in *Flaming Iguanas*, language is a clear determinant of social class and becomes a source of discrimination for its characters. As many scholars have pointed out, *Yo-Yo Boing!* is one of the first unapologetically bilingual Latina novels that, unlike some of its predecessors, does not provide an appendix of definitions for words used in Spanish nor make attempts to appeal to non-bilingual readers. Braschi's work serves not only as a gritty narrative of the Latina experience, but also as a tool for affirming *latinidad* and bilingualism as viable on the literary market. As Lourdes Torres points out, Braschi's work has been published by "academic presses, rather than mainstream ones" (86) because of its radical approach, exposing a level of market

discrimination as well. In addition to its bilingual nature, the main character or protagonist, who is only known as Kika, shows similar characteristics to Tomato Rodríguez, including a liberated sense of sexuality in a society that discriminates against her gender, race, and class, and she has a penchant for discussing socially unconventional subject matter such as menstruation and defecation. She has an affair with her professor and has sexual encounters with other women, though she rejects being called a lesbian. Unlike Tomato, she does not express any connection to an Afro-Puerto Rican identity, and this narrative instead showcases a displaced discussion of race. The racism that the narrator experiences is linked to her ethnicity and use of non-English language that marks her as *Other*, which in the U.S. cultural context signifies a non-white, non-Anglo existence. As Ed Morales affirms, “Spanglish is the state of perpetual, chameleonlike flux...Spanglish is about not having to identify with either black or white, while at the same time having the capacity to ‘be’ both. We can even be both Hispanic and Latino” (5). Language also becomes a marker of social class both in and out of the Latino social context; it a way for both Spanish and non-Spanish speaking individuals to discriminate against her, as Spanglish is viewed negatively by both populations.⁴⁸ Despite the gravity of these internal and external social pressures, *Yo-Yo Boing!* utilizes humor to highlight and criticize them. Utilizing the terminology established by Niebylski, *Yo-Yo Boing!* presents incontinent, sexually excessive, and entropic or lawless bodies in action, challenging societal expectations and prohibitions and bringing intersectional Latina identities to the forefront.

The characters in *Yo-Yo Boing!*, especially the narrator, detail the plight of women in society and in the workplace. The experience of the narrator mimics that of Braschi herself, as a woman writer in the male-dominated literary market. She remarks on the difficulties of being in a heterosexual relationship while also being a writer and feminist because of societal gender

expectations that require her to either submit to a man or, as a feminist, be completely independent, leaving little middle ground. She recalls going to a psychic for advice about her future, in which the psychic reveals:

- *Te gustaría tener tu trabajo. No depender de nadie.*

- *A mí no me gusta trabajar.*

- *¿Y qué crees de Damián?*

- *¿Qué piensas de mi libro?*

- *Me gusta más el anterior. A este todavía le falta. La construcción falla.* (Braschi 110)

While the narrator hopes to hear information regarding her latest book, the psychic remains adamant in discussing her love life, only to dismiss inquiries regarding her narrative work abruptly and point out its flaws. This reflects a culture that does not see women as valid writers, but instead relegates them to the domestic sphere as mothers and lovers. The narrator also talks about the ingrained guilt that she feels, tracing its origins back to the days of Adam and Eve (232), but ultimately rejecting these emotions that society has instilled in her subconscious. These societal expectations as a woman are heightened by her sexual orientation, as a woman who does not define herself as entirely heterosexual. In this way, Braschi's novel dialogues with the work of early-twentieth century Puerto Rican feminist Mercedes Solá, who felt that woman's entrance in the workplace in itself was *feminismo de acción*, or feminism by action, but did little to promote sexual freedom and choice that would upset the foundations of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* (Roy-Féquièrre 63-64) that ultimately saw women only as mothers. However, her use of humor to characterize the situation reflects her precarious position as a writer, wielding some authority in terms of cultural production. As the psychic realizes that the narrator is not

there for a traditional reading, she leaves the performance behind and directly asserts that she did not like the new book. Braschi reveals the fallacy of social conventions in this interaction, such as romance, as being a mere performance.

While the narrator does maintain a potentially risky romantic relationship with her professor, she also experiments with other partners as well, including some women. However, she is quick to denounce being a lesbian. In one scene, her male coworker gives her a lesbian pornography magazine, to which she replies:

- *Kinney* – I said – *I'm not a lesbian.*

- *I didn't say you were* – he laughed – *but you can't deny you're a raving feminist.*

Ian and I thought this magazine would help you find yourself.

- *No, no thank you* – I answered. (136)

This scene demonstrates general social confusion surrounding feminism, including the stereotype that a feminist must also be a lesbian. While her refusal of the magazine is not out of the ordinary given the setting, her rejection of labels is telling. As La Fountain-Stokes affirms, her denial of lesbianism is consistent throughout the book (“Pop Shock” 92), which allows it to argue against a sexual binary and any labels that would accompany it. In this sense, La Fountain-Stokes pairs the term “lesbian panic” with Negrón-Muntaner’s description of shame of the colonial subject (“Pop Shock” 89), which encapsulate the intersectionality of the narrator’s identity and experience in the aforementioned scene and throughout the novel. She is not only marginalized for her gender and her sexual proclivities, but also because she is of Puerto Rican descent in an Anglo dominated context.

Apart from her verbal refutations of gender limitations placed upon her by Puerto Rican society, the narrator utilizes her body as a vehicle of resistance. She is sexually excessive, much

like Tomato Rodríguez, pushing against cultural ideals that relegate women's sexuality to reproductive purposes only. However, in the first part, appropriately titled "Close-Up," she reaches the pinnacle of confrontation and the private sphere when detailing her experiences with menstruation and excretion, topics that have historically been deemed inappropriate for public conversation or literary publication for all citizens, much less women. At the very beginning of the text, she narrates the pleasure of defecation, describing the moment with a tone of appreciation, in third person, and referring to her excrement as "sus queridas, sus amantes pelotas, cacas, caquitas, y el aguita amarilla junto con ellas, que las derrite y las zambulle en el inodoro" (Braschi 3). She overturns the narrative of defecation that is normally characterized as something grotesque and repugnant, instead describing it in affectionate terms, expressing adoration for the excrement that her body produces as if it were a child. This scene reflects Niebylski's description of the incontinent body, one that "cannot be contained by the rules of etiquette or good manners" (26). The narrator is literally unable to contain herself, neither physically nor ideologically, lovingly describing her bowel movements and discarding societal expectations of gender. This fascination for excrement extends to her sexual activities, as she recalls a dream-like moment with a lover in which she gives birth to a child. At the same time, she evacuates her bowels, detailing the sensation of feeling "el dolor de las tripas craqueadas, por dentro suenan clavos, tuercas abiertas, pelotas, mi caquita se ha convertido en un regalo de su amor. Me tiene que querer. No le da asco mi caca" (Braschi 115). Excrement, in this scene, becomes a bonding agent between lovers, no longer something of which to be ashamed, subverting normative standards of sexuality, beauty, and appropriateness. Her monologue raises the question of which bodily fluids are appropriate to share, and which are not, and why these standards exist, becoming a microcosm of identity politics and social acceptability. *Yo-Yo Boing!*

also confronts other gendered bodily functions, such as menstruation and the female orgasm, that, much like the aforementioned scenes, transgress the boundaries of appropriateness and serve as methods for dismantling hegemonic constructions of identity.

Yo-Yo Boing! confronts racial discrimination within the Puerto Rican imaginary through serious dialogue about anti-Puerto Rican sentiment and Puerto Rico's confusing and albeit exploited status as a commonwealth of the United States. In this sense, Braschi's racial commentary is not as much about Afro-Puerto Rican identity as it is ethnicity in general as a neocolonized Puerto Rican, non-Anglo American woman living in New York City who chooses to speak Spanglish. Sarcasm laden statements about ethnicity from the narrator are often interlaced with statements about language or bilingualism and social class as well, reflecting a truly intersectional approach to identity. The use of Spanish, English, or Spanglish is intricately linked to assumptions about ethnicity and class both in and outside of the U.S. Puerto Rican context and becomes an indicator of gender in Braschi's text.

The narrator experiences overt discrimination due to her preferred use of Spanish both in public conversations and in her literary work. In one instance, while dining out with a friend, the waitress adds an extra tax to the final bill that is reserved for tourists visiting the city. With her characteristic wit, her rebuttal to the waitress goes as follows:

- Tell me, where am I from?
- I'm sorry. I really don't know.
- New York.
- You were speaking Spanish.
- New York speaks Spanish. (130)

The narrator's biting response not only demonstrates humor, but also the frustration of living in a multicultural city, being a citizen of that city and nation, and still being viewed as an outsider. In Yvette Burki's 2003 article about Puerto Rican code switching, she refers to Puerto Ricans as "extranjeros nacionales" (80), or foreign nationals, citing Carmen Ochando's 1999 interview of Gabriel Haslip-Vieira and Juan Flores. This interaction between the narrator and her waitress is symbolic of a history of systemic oppression of Puerto Ricans in New York City and in the larger context of the U.S., something that is later reflected in her thoughts about living conditions in *el barrio*. As she describes, "the problems are the same – nasty, grimy streets, repeating themselves, the same buildings crumbling...you working ad infinitum, me in the house – enrejada – doing nothing – niente a fare, reading, rocking" (Braschi 88). Her thoughts here of dilapidated structures and polluted avenues reveal the lack of attention to the Puerto Rican area of the city and reflects a history of economic separation. Historically, "Puerto Ricans have been marginalized and 'guetizados', [and have] seen the least amount of social climb among Latinos (Burki 80), as this citation from Braschi's novel reiterates. This statement also reveals the sense of entrapment that she feels in a heterosexual relationship with her male professor, who, while she remains at home to write, works endless hours outside of their home. The image of a woman *enrejada*, or caged, evokes similar symbolism from other Latina writers like Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* of the entrapped woman of the *barrio*, unable to escape her husband or her patriarchal family's control.

In addition to her public experiences with discrimination, the narrator also feels ostracized by the Hispanic community, especially within the publishing world. Her editor friends and other literary figures tell her that Spanglish is unacceptable for a text to be taken seriously. One colleague mentions that she utilizes Spanish to discuss her feelings, while English is

reserved for philosophical, intellectual debate, which the narrator characterizes as an “insulto para la hispanidad” (187). Not only is her code switching from Spanish to English something that alienates her in the public sphere, but also something that marks her as *Other* within the Latino community. This reaches a boiling point when a publishing company tries to purchase the rights to her first book, *Imperio de los sueños*, to disseminate as a paperback in Spain. As a result, the narrator and her agent engage in a humorous debate about language and colonization. Her agent begins with:

- The Italians and the Germans want it. And even the Spaniards want to translate it into Spanish.
- It was written in Spanish.
- Does Yale have the rights in Spanish?
- It's the only rights you don't have.
- Did your publishers in Spain ever pay you?
- I know what you want – you want to eat me up. I sold you Manhattan for twenty-four bucks.
- And some glass beads.
- And now you want me to surrender Spain? (211)

The narrator's attitude and humorous retorts to her agent reveal not only the alienation of Spanglish as a publishable language, but also a legacy of colonialism in which she is forced to surrender to the market demands of a foreign (publishing) power. As Torres points out, Braschi's use of “Spanish in an English language text serves to legitimize the much-maligned practice of mixing codes in vernacular speech” (76). Given that the Latino author market assumes an English audience, Braschi's code-switching upsets this expectation and paints a faithful portrait

of the Latino community that, in many cases, communicates in both languages or a hybrid of them. This conversation lends itself to her earlier statements about Puerto Rico's political status, as language is one of the key components of Puerto Rican identity both on the island and in the States. Especially for Puerto Ricans, "language is the most important symbol of identity and nationalism, so by writing in Spanish and English Braschi is making a radical statement" (Torres 88). Employing Spanglish as a valid language for publication is both a realistic portrait of how Puerto Ricans communicate in New York and an act of resistance against a market that favors a monolingual hegemony. Throughout the novel, Braschi demonstrates her ability to adapt, reflecting Morales' characterization of Spanglish as a chameleon-like state, to be both and neither. The use of Spanglish, then, is not just a reference to language, but also the adaptability of identity. Still, her account of the lack of financial compensation for the first book, receiving only twenty-four dollars, reveals deep prejudices within the Spanish-speaking literary market that places less value on Puerto Rican and Latino production. Her precarious situation corresponds to later commentary on Puerto Rico having to sell itself in order to stay afloat economically. Although humorous at face value, her question of "quien es más fuerte, la isla que se vende y come bien, o la que se mantiene erecta, y se muere de hambre" (Braschi 187) exposes the lengths at which Puerto Ricans must go to survive. Equally applying to herself and Puerto Rico as a whole, her affirmation demonstrates an economic desperation that forces both author and island to relinquish freedoms to survive. Though her dialogue is frequently marked with humor and sarcasm, it exposes deeply rooted issues about her status as a "foreign national," and corresponding exclusions of class and ethnicity, and as an individual who lives and writes in a language that is viewed as non-academic.

Along with the colonization of Puerto Rican Spanish with English language, so, too, is the national identity of the narrator wrapped in ambiguity and confusion. Ethnicity becomes a marker of otherness in an Anglo context, and Puerto Rican becomes a marker of Latino otherness because of a lack of sovereignty. The feelings of internal colonialism that characterize the Puerto Rican population are like those felt by Afro-Latinos, making the parallels between ethnicity and race in *Yo-Yo Boing!* even stronger. Referring to the colonial and neocolonial status of the island nation and its citizens, the narrator states, “what we have in common is that we are misplaced in this bloody country...we are always at a loss” (128). Her description refers to a legacy of domination by both Spain and the United States, as Puerto Rico has historically been a territory of both, and its peoples exploited for the benefit of foreign governments. The feeling of loss and displacement also reflects the legacy of the slave trade, reinforcing historical bonds and shared imaginaries of Puerto Rican ethnicity and Afro-Latinidad in the Americas. Later, the narrator mentions that she struggles on the literary market because her cultural background is complicated. When asked why she is not an ambassador for Puerto Rican identity like Pablo Neruda was for Chile, she replies, “no podemos ser embajadores porque no tenemos un país. Debido a que Puerto Rico no es un país que tenga poder en el mundo, yo no puedo establecerme como gran poeta” (194). She blames her marginalization in the market on the occupied status of the island, revealing intra-Latin American politics that view Puerto Rico as other for belonging territorially to the United States. Through humor, she remarks that her lack of literary success and recognition is due to Puerto Rico’s neocolonial position. However, as with her statements regarding language, Braschi’s humor reveals deep insecurities and frustration with a lack of political, ethnic, and realistic representation. As La Fountain-Stokes points out, the “feelings of uprootedness” (“Pop Shock” 90) that Braschi describes in *Yo-Yo Boing!* are characteristic of

many iconic Puerto Rican authors in New York, like Julia de Burgos, and demonstrate the same preoccupation for a people with a nationality that is seen as less valid because of a lack of political independence. Although *Yo-Yo Boing!* does not approach Puerto Rican racial politics in terms of skin color, internal colonialism persists in the Puerto Rican imaginary that intersects with language, ethnicity, and a lack of political sovereignty. Both López and Braschi represent a generation of U.S. Puerto Rican authors whose works represent in-between identities that situate themselves between two nations, not belonging fully to either. Going against narratives of assimilation and hegemonic cultural appropriation, these works resist labels and binaries that would mark them as either/or and limit their possibilities for expression. What is more, their use of humor and the grotesque disrupt notions of appropriateness and “insist on the right to self-definition” (“Pop Shock” 93). They present intersectional women who go against the grain of the Puerto Rican and Latino cultural imaginary, giving voice to Afro-Puerto Rican, differing sexual orientations, class, and linguistic realities who are marginalized and have historically been excluded from literary production.

As with the Cuban American and Dominican American novels analyzed in previous chapters, *Flaming Iguanas* and *Yo-Yo Boing!* also represent a simultaneous philosophical and physical departure from the community of origin. As Tomato takes to the road to discover the nation, she also discovers her identity and reaffirms a sense of pride in her difference. The narrator of *Yo-Yo Boing!* also discusses leaving and the act of walking away in the final chapter, “Blow-Up.” Entirely in Spanish, this section reveals that she has been in the process of leaving since long ago, and that she is going south, “a quemar mi ser en el estar permanente que soy, a estar bien con mi ser cuando estando bien se encuentra bien consigo mismo en su ser” (Braschi 239). Although the physical destination for this narrator is unknown, her leaving represents that

she is parting with constructions of identity that do not reflect who she truly is, something that has taken her a long time to accept and forced her to be in a perpetual state of departure as she, as much as Tomato, discover their own sense of self and redefine what it means to be U.S. Puerto Rican.

CONCLUSION

The narratives presented here reflect a growing trend in intersectional voices and representation within the Latino literary and cultural canon. As the Latino or Latinx community becomes increasingly diverse, homogenization and the focus on normative voices are no longer viable approaches to reflecting the reality of being Latina/o/x in the United States. Though it has also been categorized as Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, or Minority American Literature, this project aims to show the necessity of engaging not only the United States-based perspective, but also that of Latin America that resides in the historical memory of U.S. Latinos. In order to understand the deep-seeded conflicts with regard to gender, race, sexuality, and class that manifest themselves between the lines of the Latinx literary canon, one must have a working knowledge of Latin American literature and culture. It is no longer enough to study the experience of being non-Anglo in the United States; the field of Latinx Literature and Latinx Studies must begin to engage once more with Latin American literary and cultural studies. In this regard, an intra-Latinx perspective has created a space for analysis that necessitates the engagement of the Latin American and Caribbean theoretical and cultural canon to understand prevailing constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and class that originate in the homeland and carry over to the diaspora in the United States. Understanding the tensions that exist within Latin America and therefore within the U.S. Latinx community provides an innovative approach to analyzing identity, especially for those intersectional voices that find themselves marginalized from within and out, and truly embody the postcolonial characterization of in-betweenness.

With the growing influence of Anglo and African American culture from the outside, one-and-a-half, second, and third generation Latinos and Latinas are distancing themselves from mainstream discourses of identity in the homeland and challenging its limiting paradigms for

diverse individuals. Strategies of resistance against hegemonic ideals in literary and cultural production, like humor and performance that are discussed here, are becoming as diverse as the voices that narrate these tales of migration and marginalization. It is unsurprising that the authors here are often described as polemic, as they upset preexisting paradigms of Cuban American, Dominican American, and Puerto Rican identities. Rather than relish in a nostalgia of inherited memory and identity, Obejas, Capó Crucet, Pérez, Cruz, López, and Braschi all reveal troubling aspects of being Caribbean Latinx. They recount experiences of discrimination within familial and community structures and narrate the lives of women who do not always share their Latino nation's normative belief system or practices. They expose vulnerabilities that exist within a diaspora culture concerning identity, including questions of assimilation or recreating memory of the homeland. Each of these authors questions both the need to assimilate and to look backwards, choosing instead to create an identity that defines who she truly is, and not what her family or her community thinks she should be.

With an ever increasingly globalized context that allows people from far reaching countries to connect in an instant, future generations of Latinos and Latinas will reshape narratives of identity both in their country of origin and in the United States, as their ideas travel back and forth faster than ever before. Acts of literary and cultural resistance such as the ones presented here will allow increasing numbers of marginalized voices to challenge and transgress normative discourses, re-taking control of the debate surrounding national and diasporic national identity within both their community and the larger hemispheric American context. As a result, the Latinx literary canon will also need to expand to include new classifications of cultural production, such as spoken word, graphic novels, and other non-mainstream forms of literary publication.

In addition to the need for more representation of diverse Latina/o/x voices, the definition of Latinx also requires further investigation. Currently, one of the largest and fastest growing populations of Latin Americans in the U.S. is that of Brazilians, who began immigrating to the States after World War II and, in mass numbers, during the military dictatorship of the 1970s. The current confusion surrounding the term “Latino” versus “Hispanic” merits further analysis, as the definition provided by Sandoval and Aparicio would seemingly include Brazilians and those of Francophone Caribbean and Latin American origins. A reworking of the term “Latino” will provide ample material for intra-Latinx subjectivities as well, given the complex relationship between Dominicans and Haitians, and that of Brazilians with other Hispanic Americans.

Finally, one must return to the question of erroneous and historical homogenization of the Latinx identity and experience. The “Latino/a/x” umbrella label alludes to the assumption that Cuban Americans, Dominican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and all other diasporic Latin American groups living in the United States are the same and share the same concerns and questions regarding identity. However, with a firm grasp on Latin American cultural studies, one knows that these distinct national and regional groups have vastly different cultures and experiences within the United States that necessitate a study beyond the “U.S. Latinx” label. This project serves as a departure point for future analyses of intra-Latinx relationships and a call to rework or rethink the homogenizing label utilized to describe an increasingly diverse diasporic population in the United States.

NOTES

¹ The definition of “Latino” utilized here comes from Sandoval and Aparicio’s article, “Hibridismos culturales,” as stated on page 665. Their definition of who is Latino or Latina not only describes a shared geographic or ethnic origin in Latin America, but also a shared experience as a marginalized individual in the United States.

² As Vanessa Pérez Rosario describes this diaspora and affirms, the “Caribbean Latino” is uniquely situated “to challenge national discourses from her or his country of origin while simultaneously critiquing U.S. hegemonic narratives and imperial power in the Caribbean region” (1). Given the prolonged, deeply-rooted political ties between the Caribbean and the U.S., the Caribbean Latino is very familiar with both cultures and uniquely positioned to observe and critique them.

³ Hall regards cultural identity as being constructed in two ways: one that can be seen as collective or shared by all people, or an identity that is comprised of many smaller, superficial ways of being that are imposed on a population. He remarks that the overall unity beneath the smaller differences is where Caribbeaness is found, which he also defines as the black experience (393).

⁴ Zwagerman summarizes the ideas of Constance Rourke, who notes the pivotal role of humor on the difficult early American frontier as being as “essential as a pocketknife for survival on the fringes” (1) due to the many unknowns and frequent conflicts.

⁵ Barreca’s ideas are synthesized in Zwagerman’s study. She notes the subversive potential of women’s humor in particular, which has the ability to “point to the emperor’s new clothes” (5), or signal the preposterous belief systems that seek to limit women. Women’s humor, then, serves to destabilize these ideologies and present new ways of being.

⁶ Narciso Hidalgo summarizes Mañach’s study of *choteo* as opposition to the barbaric and uncivilized characterizations that plagued the lower-class Cubans in social settings (59).

⁷ Anderson writes that the nation is, ultimately, an imagined concept “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). This shared set of ideas and values that unites a population of strangers is what he theorizes as a nation.

⁸ Hall remarks that the Caribbean interpretation of Africa and African culture as motherland and mother culture signifies a “new” Africa that resides in the New World and unites Caribbean people, especially those of African descent. Hall synthesizes Said and Anderson when he reveals that this memory of Africa belongs to an “imaginative geography and history” while the participation in this phenomenon represents “an imagined community” of people of African descent in the Caribbean (241).

⁹ Martínez-San Miguel refers to the extended coloniality of the Caribbean and the Philippines as a result of domination by the Spanish crown in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and the United States in the late nineteenth to twentieth centuries, some of which continue today, as is the case with Puerto Rico and Guam (6).

¹⁰ Baumann writes that “memory and longing of the exiled are bound to the former homeland and they interpret their freedom to engage for political change back home...[and] appears to relate a state of enduring consciousness of living away from home” (23).

¹¹ Lorrin Thomas, in *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York*, remarks that the U.S. government struggled to choose a path for incorporating the island territory into the national makeup. He remarks that the Puerto Rican problem “became a useful shorthand to describe the increasing number of discussions among politicians, policymakers, and journalists about how to approach the unresolved colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico” (139).

¹² This phenomenon of the mass involuntary sterilization of Puerto Rican women on the island is characterized in the 1982 film *La operación* by Ana María García.

¹³ Despite being the first Hispanic-Caribbean country to gain its independence from Spain in 1821, its sovereignty was short-lived, and the island nation entered into nearly a century of struggle to maintain its independence. In 1822, just one year after declaring independence from Spain, neighboring Haiti annexed the Dominican Republic for almost a quarter century, until 1844 when independence was regained.

¹⁴ April Mayes notes that a notion of “antiblack, anti-Haitian *hispanidad* in the 1930s and 1940s in effect transformed a racist conceptualization of the Dominican nation – as a collective unified by its rejection of blackness, vodoun, and Kreyòl – held by a small group of intellectual and bureaucratic elites into an ideology that has since permeated Dominican society and culture (2).

¹⁵ Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández note that after the death of Trujillo in 1961, approximately 12,000 Dominicans made their way to the United States each year, with that number increasing steadily for the next several decades (34).

¹⁶ Refugee camps were flooded and difficult to maintain, and often became sights for human trafficking and violence. Some of the processing sites for those who were seen as difficult to sponsor for refugee status, including those with criminal records in Cuba, were sent to camps at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and Fort McCoy in Wisconsin. The harshness of these camps is characterized in Reinaldo Arenas' novel *Before Night Falls* and Jaime Cortez and Adela Vásquez's graphic novel *Sexile/Sexilio*.

¹⁷ María de los Ángeles Torres remarks that "the Freedom Flotilla, as their exodus had originally been called, gave way to a social construction that characterized the immigrants as social undesirables...these were the children of the revolution, shaped and informed by its values. Mostly single males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six, the 'Marielitos,' as they came to be called by the established Cuban exile community, could not help but clash with their Miami brethren even though they did not fit the negative press descriptions (113).

¹⁸ Fusco speaks of the convenience of the Hispanic/Latino confusion in terms of creating political voting groups and media exoticism. She rejects "the bad habits which have enabled the U.S. government and the American media to turn hundreds of ethnic groups into one – Hispanic, Latino, you name it – and systematically promote its misinterpretation as a racial term, for the benefit of a segregationist system that sees only in black and white, no matter what the other's color is...In the South, at least two centuries of ideological celebration of hybridity (the many discourses of *mestizaje*) often brings Latin American intellectuals to reject binary understandings of race" (23).

¹⁹ Yi-Lin Yu, author of *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing*, cites Tess Cosslett's definition of the matrilineal narrative to describe it as "one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors" (2).

²⁰ Yu mentions the "emergency of two recurring themes - motherhood and mother-daughter relationships - in diasporic women writers' exploration of the intricate affinities between their female identity and their motherlands or mother cultures" (127).

²¹ In her introduction, Marta Caminero-Santangelo speaks to the instability of Latin American identity, citing Silvio Torres-Saillant and Juan Flores, who regard Latina/o and Latin American identity as always being subject to revision.

²² Halperin investigates the many manifestations of psychological and physical harm inflicted upon diverse Latinas. She utilizes intersectionality or intersections as a theoretical grounding because "the term connotes a sense of place (whether physical or psychological) and a mode of theorization that recognizes important connections among race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class" (4). She also argues that the Latina authors studied in her book "critique hegemony from without *and* within, as they criticize both interethnic and intraethnic hegemonic discourses" (10), offering a similar geographical positioning to my own project.

²³ As cited in Zwagerman, Rourke states that "'derision becomes an outward shell covering a multitude of submerged emotions, rage, fear, bewilderment, an awkward love; the blank formula takes on intensity; emotion is still inarticulate, as earlier under the comic sway, but it surges toward the surface" (*Wits End*, 58).

²⁴ Smith and Padula discuss this, noting that Mary was the role model for young Cuban women: "powerless...without sexual instincts, the servant of men" (8).

²⁵ Jennine Capó Crucet, at both conferences and on her website, insists that she is from Hialeah, not Miami, asserting the influence of this working-class neighborhood that formed her literary imaginary.

²⁶ The 1.5 or one-and-a-half generation is an idea propagated by Rubén Rumbaut, as cited in Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen*, page 4. He cites Rumbaut's definition of 1.5 as "children who were born abroad but are being educated and come of age in the United States."

²⁷ Paraphrased from page 3 of Juanita Heredia's *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century*.

²⁸ Torres writes that those who emigrated Cuba in 1980 were "mostly single males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six, the 'Marielitos,' as they came to be called by the established Cuban exile community, could not help but clash with their Miami brethren even though they did not fit the negative press descriptions" (113).

²⁹ This wave of Cuban refugees was the most diverse, both racially and in terms of economic class, which began to challenge the idea of a predominantly white Cuban "race" in the United States.

³⁰ The prevalence of poor women and/or women of African heritage employed as sex workers in Cuba dates back to the colonial era. Smith and Padula affirm that "in 1657 the bishop of Havana complained to the Spanish crown that slaves, in some cases owned by priests and monks, were engaged in prostitution" (10). This demonstrates a legacy of

women of color in the sex industry, both legally and illegally, as it was one of the few options for self-employment and independence.

³¹ The Dominican Republic and the United States experienced paralleled moments of crisis; as the United States entered and exited Civil War in the 1860s, the Dominican Republic regained its independence from Haiti and resisted Spanish re-colonization. The Dominican Republic then sought annexation to the United States, but this was rejected in U.S. Congress. The Dominican Republic was hoped to become a place for freed blacks to reside, as Frederick Douglass and many others “wanted the U.S. to annex Santo Domingo and Haiti to give people of color a better chance at success” (Mayes 16). Some decades later, the U.S. military would occupy the island nation at the onset of World War I.

³² This review also highlights the relative absence of Latin America-based historical and theoretical foundations utilized to discuss Latina/o/x literature. For the most part, Latinx literature has been theorized from a U.S.-based lens.

³³ Mayes discusses the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic as a moment of social progress for women. She remarks that “women were pivotal in the struggle against the U.S. military occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924, in part as a result of the intervention itself, which has profoundly transformed the political landscape and social norms in women’s favor” (122). On this page, Mayes also details specific jobs that women were allowed to obtain during this era.

³⁴ Mayes notes that, “laws in the 1940s regarding women enhanced their access to education while limiting their principal role in Dominican society to motherhood” (136).

³⁵ Laura Halperin also affirms that Marina represents inherited and internalized racism with regard to Dominican identity, remarking that she “clings to dominant Dominican and U.S. racialized ideas of beauty” (58).

³⁶ Gabriel Haslip-Viera recalls in “Changing Identities: An Afro-Latin@ Family Portrait” that he heard this expression within his own family, which is “a concept historically prevalent in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean that encourages non-White persons to make every effort to ‘improve’ the family racial stock by marrying White or as White as possible” (147). Edna Acosta-Belén also addresses this phenomenon, noting it gives privilege to light or white skin (17).

³⁷ In *The Dominican Americans*, Torres-Saillant and Hernández mention that “when Dominicans come to the United States, however, they escape the ideological artillery that sustains negrophobic thought in the homeland, and they have a greater possibility of coming to terms with their real ethnicity” (143).

³⁸ Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, in *Daughters of Caliban*, writes that “very often the process of migration, by forcing women into unfamiliar situations, experiences, and struggles, has resulted in a radicalization of political and social perspectives, leading women to assume roles not readily open to them in their home societies. Such is the case, for example, of Dominican women in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, who have taken leadership roles in the domestic and community spheres which would have been disallowed in the Dominican Republic” (13).

³⁹ Marisel Moreno refers to the Puerto Rican literary diaspora as “U.S. Puerto Rican” (6).

⁴⁰ The evils of racial miscegenation and desire for “whitening” in the Puerto Rican imaginary can be attributed to Pedreira’s *Insularismo*, the canonical work on the Puerto Rican condition that soared to popularity in the early twentieth century (Roy-Féquièrre 5).

⁴¹ Edna Acosta-Belén points out that in the late nineteenth century narratives of nation and national identity frequently left out Afro-Puerto Ricans in an effort to whitewash the population and establish stronger perceived links to Spain and Europe (16).

⁴² Thomas notes that, “one writer asserted that the real problem was that after Hispanic women had tried and failed to become ‘americanas,’ they would languish in a middle ground of a ‘confused identity.’ Maximiano Ríos Ríos, a Puerto Rican literature scholar, wondered whether ‘nuestras virgencitas de Hispano America’ (‘our little virgins of Hispanic America’) could handle the ‘liberty’ of life in the city that more worldly American women enjoyed” (33).

⁴³ See Ganser, page 220.

⁴⁴ In *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, Victor Vázquez-Hernández writes that “between 1945 and 1970, the Puerto Rican community of Philadelphia blossomed into the third largest concentration in the United States” (101).

⁴⁵ Cooper cites Muñoz’s explanation that “disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence” (13).

⁴⁶ La Fountain-Stokes indica que “para López, que no creció con su padre, lo puertorriqueño o latino se asimila principalmente a través de la raza, es decir, de la conciencia de la experiencia racializada a la que se le somete en una sociedad racista; También funciona a través de la incorporación de elementos de la cultural popular (de los estereotipos populares)” (“De sexilio(s)...” 152).

⁴⁷ Enevold writes, “in addition to expelling male road models, she calls for a new one: She demands —to be represented. Her search for a representative after which to model herself sexually and racially is expressed throughout the narrative. Tomato keeps commenting on her own constitution as ethnic and sexual being” (146).

⁴⁸ Ilan Stavans notes that, within both Anglo and Hispanic American social contexts, Spanglish is often seen as the obstacle that must be overcome in order to assimilate to Anglo American culture (3).

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