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Ivonne Gonzalez

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REVERSING BORRÓN Y CUENTA NUEVA: THE  
CURATIVE POWER OF FAMILY MEMORY IN THE  
NOVELS OF LOIDA MARITZA PEREZ AND NELLY  
ROSARIO

by

IVONNE GONZALEZ

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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GONZALEZ

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Reversing *borrón y cuenta nueva*: The Curative Power of Family  
Memory in the Novels of Loida Maritza Pérez and Nelly Rosario

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Ivonne Gonzalez

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Reversing *borrón y cuenta nueva*: The Curative Power of Family  
Memory in the Novels of Loida Maritza Pérez and Nelly Rosario

by

Ivonne Gonzalez

Advisor: Christopher Schmidt

I examine two novels, *Geographies of Home* by Loida Maritza Perez and *Song of the Water Saints* by Nelly Rosario, written by Dominican American authors, to determine how they present identity with relation to family history in conjunction with an analysis of my life and the circumstances that have helped define my identity. I explore how the characters in the texts are affected by the loss of family history, the role that gaze and family memory play in reclaiming that which is lost, and how these all shape identity. The families in the novels seem destined to lead desolate lives; family dissolution with unimaginable horrors occurring within the home and an inability to protect one's own. These experiences are the result of the loss of family history. In connecting to the past of our ancestors, one can perhaps learn those lessons that can otherwise be painful to experience and be able to build upon this preexisting archive of knowledge rather than starting from nothing. My own experiences reflect the positive effect knowledge of family history has on identity; mine is shaped by my family's pursuit in education, instilling of family history and pride. It is this sense of familial history that seems so absent in the novels. However, through the act of gazing, the protagonists are able to reclaim a part of that history allowing for a more complete understanding of the self.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of identity, how we see ourselves and the perception we hope to convey to others, fuels our actions, and forms our thoughts, and it is the basis upon which we make judgments of the world around us. It can empower individualistic pursuits and accomplishments or unite a community. Yet it is not static, bound from the moment of birth until our last. Identity is fluid, changing as we age, mature, become educated to the intricacies of our world, and encounter other identities. Indeed, much of the understanding of our identities occurs upon meeting others and the attempt to know ourselves by defining as different or by finding shared beliefs. I am personally intrigued by the formation of identity; how moments of encounter can fundamentally shift our self-perception, leading us to renegotiate our memories; how memories are both recalled and reformulated, at the intersections of supposed contradictory identities; how they develop, and what they become. The role of family history in how one may negotiate one's sense of self is particularly intriguing to me. Coming from a family that often shares the stories and lessons of those who came before and for whom identity is so closely aligned with our past as well as the futures of the extended family, I found it interesting to see how others may express such a connection.

I begin this project from this standpoint of trying to understand identity, perhaps because I have grappled with connecting to certain aspects of my own identity. Being of Dominican descent, and so belonging to a minority, while at the same time being American has provided tensions within my identity and how others expected me to be. Today I view my identity as stemming from neither one nor the other but both in addition to the myriad aspects that define each—after all, there is neither one American culture nor Dominican identity. What so strongly fueled my identity as a *dominicana* were the stories of the family; living in a different country

from the majority of my family, these stories provide me access to our family identity, and so allow me to tether my sense of self to them and associate this to *la patria*.

I intend to use literature, to interrogate the texts written by fellow Dominican-Americans in hopes of discovering how they present identity—I neither intend to dispute nor define a uniform *dominicanidad*, which cannot exist. To propose that there is only one or even a handful of definitions that can encompass an entire population, to uphold the experiences of some as the definition of the Dominican or Dominican-American identity while silencing others results in the loss of other voices whose experiences can enrich our understanding of the human race. Loida Maritza Perez, author of *Geographies of Home*, disputes the notion that a text could be read as representing the Dominican experience. She writes:

There is no “typical experience” either for Dominicans living in this country or for those remaining in the Dominican Republic, just as there is none for Americans who have lived in the United States since their ancestors arrived on the Mayflower. We live our lives in myriad different ways... This stated, I nonetheless believe that –regardless of the possibly unique circumstances presented in *Geographies*—Dominicans and other Latinos will encounter familiar issues... Ultimately, these issues pertain to the human condition: our need to belong and be accepted; the contradictions inherent in all of us; our attempts to do the best we can even in the worst circumstances; our desire to guide our children and the risk of making mistakes along the way; our wondrous ability to sometimes understand and forgive; and our faith in a force greater than ourselves. (5-6)

All of our experiences, our identities are valid and it is of utmost necessity to take into consideration these multitude of identities if we are to approach the human story. My experiences, which continue to shape my identity, differ from the Dominican-Americans

portrayed in the texts. My family's social, cultural, religious, and economic identities, at times utterly opposite of the characters, have defined my experiences and together fuse to create the basis of my identity. It is my intention then to examine the ways in which these authors express a *dominicanidad*, how they perceive their Dominican-American community, and reach a better understanding of how these come together to form the identity of the characters in the text. In my study I will be focusing on two novels, *Geographies of Home* by Loida Maritza Perez and *Song of the Water Saints* by Nelly Rosario, which both portray families with radically opposing tendencies to my own: where silence permeates the home, and the loss of connection or silencing of family past leads to harm and at times a loss of self. I purport to explore how the characters are affected by the loss of family history, the role that gaze and family memory play in reclaiming that which is lost, and how these all shape identity.

Similar to such authors as Hille Koskela, who is “committed to the feminist notion of identities being constructed through and by power relations” (257), I intend to delve into how power is mitigated through the interplay of the gaze, how it plays a role in the forming of an identity. Much of the project focuses intimately on examining identity formation in relation to family and familial history. To widen the perception of Dominican identity, I will include my story inspired by the novels, offering a view of my *dominicanidad*. In doing so, not only do I hope to provide another layer to *dominicanidad* but also lay bare any biases to be more transparent and thus the reader can better situate the research itself.

I will interrogate these findings with an analysis of my life thus far, the ways in which circumstances have come to steer my own life and opportunities and thus to provide another voice as well as an autoethnographic analysis to expand what it might mean to be a Dominican-American. An area of urban studies which may be of use in this analysis is that of mobility—

social as well as geographic, both intricately linked—which greatly influence one’s experiences. More important than the mobility with which I have been blessed to experience is the connection maintained through stories shared by my parents about the Dominican Republic, my family, their childhoods and adolescent years. These stories have kept alive my connection to the *patria* at times when the accessibility of the actual place and people were limited. In his article, “Sharing: Collected Memories in Communities of Records,” Eric Ketelaar delves into the roles maintaining records play in the memories of groups, both public (nations) and private (families) and how these are the basis of culture. “Through the family memory the individual is connected with a past he or she has not experienced” (4). This idea of connecting to the past of our ancestors suggests that through these stories one can perhaps learn those lessons that can otherwise be painful to experience and be able to build upon this preexisting archive of knowledge rather than starting from nothing.

#### WHY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I have been inspired by various analyses using autoethnography to better understand a particular group. Though it usually frames sociological studies, I sensed the applicability of it to other fields: namely literature, or better yet, using literary texts to better understand the communities from which they are produced. Indeed, literary texts provide numerous perspectives and have been used to view the social customs and historical perspectives of societies past. In the article, “An Autoethnographic Design: Using Autoethnographic Methods to Understand and Portray Experience through Design,” Madeline Balaam aptly describes the applicability of autoethnography:

Used in many analytic and imaginative ways, autoethnography...is a form of ethnography that uses the self as a lens to understand a wider culture and in turn uses the

experiences of others to better understand the self. [Its] increased use ...is reflective of a shift in social sciences to focus further on emotion, as well as an increasing questioning of the generalizability, and objectivity of knowledge. (1)

The very definition as stated here indicates that the self is used to understand the culture and vice versa. That the ideas of self and the larger culture feed off one another, evokes an image of intertextuality, but rather than the interconnectivity of texts, it is the connection of identities. We have distanced ourselves from the assumption that there is in fact one truth, a singular mode in which to view and understand the world. We have stepped away from the idea that the researcher, academician, or scientist are all objectively producing analyses of the data they collect; objectivity does not appear to be attainable. As such, the trend of autoethnography demonstrates this acceptance and the value now ascribed to open, documented acknowledgment of the subjectivity inherent in any intellectual pursuit. The very questions that fuel any intellectual endeavor come from the subjectivity of the researcher, their perception of the world. One must even examine the opportunities that allow some to reach the educational background that allows for these analyses. For my part, much comes from the cultural capital I inherited. The pursuit of education and reading extensively were all tenets of my household. That I was born and raised in the US certainly enriched my education, but I do not doubt that had I been born in Dominican Republic, my education would have similarly flourished as the educational histories of my cousins suggest. The majority of my cousins, if not all, have pursued postsecondary education and have attained degrees in various fields. These accomplishments, while lauded, are not deemed atypical but are rather expected.

The format in which autoethnography is conducted is not quite solidified, perhaps due to its newness or due to its “questioning of the generalizability...of knowledge” and thus how one

can attain it. The focus of the field can differ as Sarah Wall points out in “Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography”:

Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on auto (self), -ethno- (the sociological connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process)... Although some consider a personal narrative to be the same thing as an autoethnography... others use autoethnography as a means of explicitly linking concepts from the literature to the narrated personal experience...and support an approach as rigorous and justifiable as any other form of inquiry...Examples of this emerging method reveal that autoethnography has been used as a way of telling a story that invites personal connection rather than analysis, ...exploring issues of personal importance within an explicitly acknowledged social context, ...evaluating one’s actions, ...or critiquing extant literature on a topic of personal significance... Autoethnography might be more of a philosophy than a well-defined method...so there remains considerable creative latitude in the production of the autoethnographic text. (39)

Its “creative latitude” is perhaps what first drew me to its applicability, the ability to mold it to best accomplish the task. The aforementioned interconnectivity between self and culture implicit in the field of autoethnography compels one to look to other ways in which to contextualize self and cultural identity. “[S]ome researchers produce narrative autoethnographies that blend fiction and real life...thereby crossing the border between art and science” (Balaam 1). Similarly I intend to conduct my own autoethnographic interrogation of these texts, “blend[ing] fiction and real life” and blending the analysis of my life with those of the fictional characters in the texts. Alongside an analysis of my life and the circumstances that have helped define my identity, I

will probe these texts for the ways in which they might portray identities of *dominicanidad* in an attempt to convey the complexities behind identity formation and its multifaceted intricacies.

While I intend on analyzing my experiences in conjunction with the analysis of the texts, it would be irresponsible of me to knowingly convey a persona of someone aware of all my biases; it is my duty to acknowledge that there are still shortcomings as a researcher or biases that I may still hold and of which I am not aware. I will differentiate the sections from the texts distinct from my own by conveying my reflections through the first person hence making visible the distinction between fiction and life. This very work will demonstrate a dialogue between the texts and me and attempt to provide a better understanding of the multifaceted aspects of *dominicanidad*.

## Chapter 1: Laying the Groundwork

### THE DOMINICAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE

Both Loida Maritza Perez's and Nelly Rosario's works are considered as part of the literature of the Dominican diaspora. That the works of both Perez and Rosario, along with Angie Cruz, were published by "major US publishing houses attests to the high degree of vibrancy and recognition that the literature of Dominicans has acquired in recent years" and the growing academic and scholarly work around their texts convey that their value has not been unacknowledged (Moreno 101). Despite the fact that Dominicans have been immigrating to other countries for a long time, an influx left the island after the demise of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, greatly influencing the population of Dominicans in the United States. Until the emergence of Junot Diaz's and Julia Alvarez's literary generation, much of the work of Dominicans was written in Spanish, making it inaccessible to the majority of the United States. For many, having left their native country for New York, the proximity to the island allowed

some to return often and continue their connection to the homeland. The back and forth existence of these migrants resulted in a hybrid identity for some, a “[suspension] between the two countries and [thus occupation] of the liminal space...[an] in-betweenness...the simultaneous belonging to both and unbelonging to either of the systems, which reflects the migrant condition” (Majkowska 114-116). This loss of identification through belonging to a place, this loss of home, is explored in much of the works of diasporic groups and is certainly evidenced in the works of Dominican American authors, including Julia Alvarez, Angie Cruz, Junot Díaz, as well as the authors focused on in this study. Their works portray characters who are forced to negotiate the loss of home and adapt their identities to this new hybrid space. It is to best represent or mirror the in-between status of this hybrid space that Majkowska suggests these authors use the mechanism of magical realism. “Carpentier believed that the spirit of the Latin American culture, namely the mixture of cultures, is impossible to be expressed without the use of magical realism. Thus, it may be concluded that the magical realism has been employed to discuss the migrant condition of in-betweenness” (120). The use of magical realism allows for the crossing of boundaries between what we perceive as the real world and the world of the supernatural and as such is an astute way of placing the reader in a similarly liminal space.

Not only must they navigate being Other in the new land but the statuses of the immigrants change on returning to the homeland. Perez expresses this relationship to home in “Voices from Hispaniola”:

“Home” becomes even harder to define when one is also considered an outsider in one’s native country for having lived abroad. Such perceptions leave us feeling neither authentically Dominican nor American... [It] is up to each of us to define for ourselves what those terms mean. I don’t even tie the concept of home to a specific land mass. For

me, 'home' is an abstract, psychic space with which I render as 'home' any place I choose to inhabit. (74-75)

The difficulty in defining "home" is a prevalent theme in the works of these authors in which the protagonists work to reorient their identities away from a particular country or place and toward a "psychic space" on which they can base their ideas of self. Julia Alvarez's works too demonstrate the necessity to reformulate identity for those who lose the physical "home" by immigrating: "[The characters of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* are] in search of the secret ingredient that has been missing from their lives [since leaving the Dominican Republic]... [are] intent on finding [their] true [selves], the idealized place within [them], the cut-off limb the memory of which still lingers and hurts" (Cheverşan 86). In returning to the island, the protagonists envision reconnecting to their sense of self tied to the very island but are confronted by the realization that they are "living between two competing systems of cultural consciousness, awareness, representation and expectation" and that as such they are now Other there as well (87). This dissociation of "home" to a physical place in which it is housed in the mind renders the idea of self more fluid, able to accommodate memories as well as the shifting self-perceptions that experiences engender.

In addition to this redefining of home, there is a tendency to portray multiple voices in the texts, representative of the multiple immigrant, and human, experiences. Perez notes,

...having recognized reality as a multifaceted thing—I write from multiple, contradictory perspectives and in no way set out to define what a specific reality might be...I refuse to provide ...[an authoritative] narrator and leave it to readers to decide what are the essential truths or realities within the text. ...I want the act of reading to be as disconcerting for the reader as living life is for the characters, who, being immigrants,

can take little for granted and are perpetually forced to reevaluate not only their lives but reality as well. (“Voices of Hispaniola” 76-77)

The inclusion of multiple perspectives not only demonstrates the myriad ways in which immigration affects different people and the multiplicity of life, but the multiple factors contesting and coalescing to create identity. Perez’s decision not to present an “authoritative narrator” in order to allow for a more open-ended reading of her work mirrors Chevereșan’s description of Alvarez’s refusal to end a story with all concerns resolved and questions answered:

Alvarez’s novel does not have a happy Hollywood-like ending. Identities are not yet complete and Americanization does not quite turn out to be the key to ultimate fulfillment. Neither does the Island, romantically (and theoretically) invested with regenerative power. There are still uncertainties to fight in both territories, questions to answer, decisions to make...Alvarez proves to be an ambitious writer, whose aim is that of capturing as many hypostases of the transnational individual as possible. (92)

Ending without necessarily resolving all the issues that surface throughout the plot is indicative of the ways in which the authors view identities. Not only are our identities constructed from varying perceptions, connections and circumstances, but they continue to reconfigure as we navigate our lives.

#### MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I have long been attracted by the idea of identity formation, how it is informed by so many factors. Perhaps too my fascination stemmed from the ways I had to negotiate aspects of my own identity, not only with myself but with others. Both my parents were born and raised in the Dominican Republic, in a region called El Cibao. Unlike many who immigrate to the United

States however, my family was not solely prompted by economic need; they were in search of other dreams beyond employment. We would often return for summer visits to the extended family, which is quite large (64 first cousins, or *primo hermanos*, thus far); these visits not only allowed me glimpses into the lives my parents held before leaving their homeland, but also allowed the stories of the family and virtues inherent in them to be more securely attached to persons and place. My person has been informed by my family, what it means to be a part of it, the expectations that have always been connected to the family, but also by what it meant for my parents to come here, the dreams they went in search of and the dreams that they had to lay down. Growing up, I often had to defend what I aligned myself to, Dominican or American, to cousins who themselves shifted from one to the other, yet I define myself as a Dominican-American Gonzalez.

I speak often of my family because their dreams and experiences have informed how I see myself and the world around me. But also, in examining their conditions I can understand the ways in which I have been highly privileged in certain contexts that perhaps others have not. That I have had opportunities to travel, to visit not only my family in the Dominican Republic but other countries, I know is intimately linked to my privilege. My mother too, as a young woman, was provided the opportunity to travel to Europe, South and Central America, and Canada, a leisurely activity of which not all are able to partake. In a family of over a dozen children, she was not the only member granted the opportunity to travel. Several of her brothers studied outside of the Dominican Republic. From both sides of my family I have inherited much cultural capital, which allowed me to value education from the moment I could comprehend the words. My mother instilled in me the love of reading the classics at an early age. I remember an instance in which I was reading a contemporary novel; my mother, while acknowledging the

importance of all literature, urged me not to forget the classics. While this may have underscored the ways in which some works are read as Literature and others are not, my mother's stance both allowed for my continued adventuring into other works and that I maintain a respect and curiosity about what came before. Beyond expanding our minds through literature, my parents made sure that we had access to additional sources of learning. On weekends and in the summer, they enrolled us in courses for: music, violin, clarinet, and singing between the two of us; athletics such as a summer of tennis and a number of years in swimming; mathematics; public speaking; even a class on study skills etc. to supplement what we learned in the classroom. College was never an option. It was a duty as a member of my family, an expectation of this generation. Growing up, I often heard of the intellectual leaps that my cousins had accomplished here or in the Dominican Republic and my parents nudged us towards the same path.

To understand and hence always keep in mind that there are hierarchies of privilege, I need to delve deeper. Though I am not white, I am nonetheless of slightly lighter skin color than the generalized image of the Dominican. I often wonder at how, had I been a darker shade, my experiences would have been shaped differently. Though I have had moments where I felt unwanted, the numbers are few and I suppose it is partly due to my *leche con café* complexion (one of the ways in which my family differentiates between color is in reference to coffee along with the *india clara*, *indio*, etc. that is used in Dominican Republic). In Dominican Republic, the color of my skin and that of my family is certainly one aspect that provides my family with privileges and access to opportunities that may be barred to others. This and that I am easily recognized as a member of the family when I visit Conuco I suspect frame how others in the community respond to my presence. That I am American they always know somehow, but I have

not faced the derision others do on their return for being “dominicanyork.” In her article analyzing Angie Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee*, Marisel Morena explores the perceptions of Dominicans who left the island, and quotes Patricia Pessar:

More recently, the image on the island of Dominican immigrants and *retornados* has turned far more alien and sinister...in the ‘80s [they] were fondly called...*ausentes*...Today’s more popular terms—‘dominican’ (rather than ... ‘dominicano’), ‘dominicanyork’... and ‘cadenu’ (a gold necklace wearer, an allusion to drug kingpins and pushers)—serve to highlight the social distance...between [Dominicans]...and returnees. (103)

Perhaps the bonds my parents maintained with their family in the Dominican Republic, that they always returned with us, and the stories they in turn shared with their siblings about us (the act of sharing family stories works in both directions), enabled my family members to not concede to this growing stereotyped image of the Dominican American. I may not speak Spanish with the same fluency as they do, though it has improved over the years, may not understand all of the references to which they allude, may not even hold the same political views (what family does?), but I do not feel as an outsider in my family.

The fact that I often do not meet stereotyped images of the Dominican has led to many conflicting moments in the US. Others of Dominican descent have explained to me that I am not Dominican, despite having generations of family grounded on that island. My distaste for some types of music and baseball created moments of frustration for others who stare blankly at me because I do not fit their narrow definition of a *dominicana*. I was told by a member of my high school class, for whom I was editing a Spanish paper, that unlike other US born Latinas such as Dominicans, my Spanish was well accented. After informing her that I was in fact of Dominican

descent, she expressed many apologies. A more recent occurrence ended an acquaintanceship. This person, who was once within my social circle, began expounding on the frustrations he has felt in working with Dominicans for their overall obnoxiousness, ignorance, etc. After arguing the point that one cannot generalize an entire population based on a few encounters, I was told that my family and I were exceptions and therefore my point was not valid. I list these to indicate the times I have had to contend with the stereotypes that have so firmly attached to the Dominican immigrant.

The image of the Dominican as poor and uneducated is a constant affront to my family identity, but also to what I know of any population: that generalizations are poor forms of understanding people; that a lack of formal education does not imply stupidity or ignorance but usually the systemic, social and economic constraints which disadvantage certain groups and perpetuate their conditions for generations to come; that poverty is another aspect of the historical oppression of certain people; and that each and every population encompasses a myriad of personalities and identities.

While it was my father's dream of singing that inspired him to move to New York, there were other, larger factors that played a role in shaping not only his but the migration of other Dominicans to the city and other parts of the United States. Though Dominicans have been migrating to the United States before the 1960s, the largest migration of Dominicans occurred in this time, a direct result of the assassination of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, the United States backed dictator who ruled from 1930 until 1961. During his tyrannical reign, Trujillo greatly restricted the movement of people both within the country and to other parts of the world. After his assassination, restrictions on travel loosened, allowing a larger number of people to leave. "While by far of those who have emigrated have been driven by a desire for economic

progress—an improved income—the earliest large-scale migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States generally, and New York more especially, was politically motivated” (Krohn-Hansen 31). Indeed, due to the restrictive policies of the previous dictator and the then unrest, uncertainty, and instability of the regime under the dictator’s puppet, many who could leave the country did.

After Trujillo was assassinated, the country could finally freely elect its own president. When they did so in 1962, they democratically elected Juan Bosch as the leader of the country. However, a military coup forcefully removed him from office only seven months into his presidency. Many fought for the return of their elected official but could hardly be expected to win against the military and the United States, which, for the second time, came to occupy the Dominican Republic (the first time was in 1916 at which point they trained the military, amongst the ranks, a young Trujillo). US intervention ensured that Juan Bosch would not be permitted to do the job for which he had been elected and instead secured the rule of Joaquin Balaguer. Balaguer was not unfamiliar to this role; during Trujillo’s regime, Balaguer served many roles for the dictator: puppet president, speech writer, propaganda writer, essentially the intellectual aspects Trujillo needed to continue his reign. Thus, though the dictator was dead, his hold over the nation continued in this new form. Balaguer would rule intermittently between 1966 and 1996; “[h]is first twelve years in power (1966-78) were violently repressive and have been described as ‘Trujillismo without Trujillo’” (34). During this time, there was great unrest throughout the country, no less so in the capital where civil war broke out.

I try to imagine what it must have been like for my father there, during the unrest at which point he had been studying at Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo (the first university of the Americas). Seeing what the war and general civil unhappiness brought to the

citizens and after living most of his life under such a repressive dictatorship, I wonder if he looked at his current track and thought it futile. Did he sense that though he might graduate, employment was becoming increasingly difficult to secure? “[I]n spite of the national growth, a large number of Dominicans, including graduates, actually saw their meager incomes fall during the 1970s” (35). Perhaps the allure of singing was simply too strong, pulled too intently on his heartstrings; perhaps it seemed a better alternative, promised a happier future than what he was witnessing there in the capital. Witnessing the mass exodus of his peers who travelled to the US in hopes of better opportunities, Papi too sought the promise of America.

Things continued to grow bleak in Dominican Republic. Wages decreased to about a quarter of what the counterparts in the US were, and so people moved to where they could pursue a brighter future. They moved for a chance at better wages, better living conditions away from the violence of the Balaguer presidency, and toward opportunities promised by the American Dream. To an extent, I suppose, my father bought into that dream, the chance to make it, and what better place to try than New York, New York.

At the time that Papi journeyed to the United States, there was an ongoing influx of immigration, not just from the Dominican Republic, but from other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Eastern Europe and Asia. New York of course had always been an immigrant city, the first stop for many from Europe and other areas who wished to find happiness in this new world. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, New York had seen the arrival of African Americans, who came north in what is known as the Great Migration, and Puerto Ricans. The city was home to many immigrants and newcomers all trying to succeed in the American dream.

Papi initially stayed with family, first a cousin and later his younger brother. Having family already settled in the states provided a necessary base from which he was able to cull invaluable knowledge about the community, culture, driving skills, and where to find employment. In turn, my father was able and more than willing to help other members of the family to acclimate as they made their trek to the United States. “Earlier immigrants and their descendants often play the role of ‘hosts’ to the new arrivals, passing on lessons about New York and the United States” (Foner et. al 42). Indeed, this pattern of immigrants arriving, settling down and then providing the next wave of immigrants with the necessary skills for survival and success is what has helped form many institutions in the city.

Arriving in New York in the late 1970s must have been quite a shock to my father. At the time of his journey, he was 27, and, as I imagine him, a bright-eyed youth, ready and eager to do what was needed to reach his goal. The New York of the '70s, the one where Times Square was the last place to take a family, where evidence of drug use and the sex industry were prevalent, was much different than the one promised to those who would dare to take the journey.

Despite the initial disappointment, Papi persevered. Amidst working manual jobs in the garment district, he searched and found many teachers and singing coaches who would help him hone his craft. Not only had he been enrolled at the Escuela de Bellas Artes in San Francisco de Macoris in the Dominican Republic, in New York, he trained at the Television Art School, once located at 743 Eighth Avenue. From there he trained under the tutelage of three private instructors. As he continued to excel in his classes, his teachers would sign him up to many competitions; some he would win, others he would not, but through it all he did it his way.

## Chapter 2: THEIR STORY: Home

My father and later on mother were only two of an influx of Dominicans who, in their search for better lives, left *la patria* in pursuit of different opportunities. Joining this group are the characters of *Geographies of Home* and *Song of the Water Saints*, in which we follow the matrilineal descent of those who journey from *el campo* of the Dominican Republic to New York City. What is perhaps most interesting about these novels is the damaging effects to which the silencing of familial past exposes the subsequent generations. In “Voices from Hispaniola,” Perez comments on the importance of the sharing of stories in which “histories and knowledge” are transmitted: “[The purveyors of stories] ... wield a lot of influence, not only by the stories they pass on but also by those they withhold. It is this selective sharing and willful withholding of certain histories which leads to many of the conflicts within *Geographies*” (70). In some instances, this silencing is self-imposed while in others this loss of connection is inherited, forced upon the characters by those members whose responsibility it is to transmit knowledge. In both instances, we are made privy to the damage that results. We see characters at a loss of self or belonging, or those doomed to repeat the errors of their ancestors without the knowledge that this path has already been attempted. Some try to break the silences on history, reaching past the veils of silence so long imposed. The methods by which silence is broken are varied but the gaze plays a significant role in bringing about self-reflection resulting in an awakening of family history. Through the act of gazing, some of these characters begin to grasp the extent of the loss and are able to begin to piece together parts of their family history to secure a stronger self.

### I. *Geographies of Home*

*Geographies of Home* by Loida Maritza Perez is the story of one family, their struggles to reframe their history and find a sense of home. The story focuses on Iliana’s journey of self-

discovery while also demonstrating the growth exhibited by different members of her family: Aurelia, her mother; Papito, her father; her eldest sister Rebecca, who was the first to move to the US and through hard work was able to gather the necessary documentation and funds to bring her family to the states; and Marina, another sister who we find is deeply unstable.

Like many immigrants who come to the United States, Iliana's parents came here to search for a better life, for more opportunities with which to provide their children. Their previous lives in the Dominican Republic were not necessarily of absolute poverty nor of economic comfort. In coming to New York, they encounter a never-ending struggle to survive, a continuous sacrifice of self that seems to have little reward. Only recently upon purchasing a house in Brooklyn does the family feel some sense of security. Aurelia had hoped that she had finally provided a home, a place in which the children can feel stable and to which they can feel rooted. It is unfortunate then that having found a place in which to settle down their daughter Marina nearly burns it down in a psychotic episode. But what exactly constitutes a home? Is it the place, the people, or the memories that travel with us and form our sense of self? Through Iliana and Aurelia, we delve into this question:

...Aurelia had not imagined that one of their children would try to burn [the house] down. Not when it had kept them from the streets. Not when it was the only house in their adopted country which they had been able to call their own. Instead, she had expected each family member to feel secure in the knowledge that never again would they be cramped into a three-room apartment like their first or be evicted as they had from their last. But what Marina had conveyed by setting fire to the kitchen was that the house, like the life she had previously attempted to destroy and which her parents had tried to ensure was better than their own, meant little.

...Five years of arduous work had transformed the house into a home, and she was incapable of the strength necessary to begin again or to dream of possibilities after she and Papito had invested all they had in the house which was to be the comfort of their old age, the anchor in their children's lives. (21-22)

At the start of the novel, we find that Aurelia had expected the brownstone to represent home, provide a sense of stability, of family and identity, for her children. Yet the ease with which Marina nearly destroys it compels Aurelia to see that it is not a house which acts as anchor in life but the sense of belonging and feeling of safety and stability which her home could not provide.

Though Aurelia and Papito have reached the age at which most would retire, they continue in the daily toil to support their family. Though they spent years working, dedicating themselves to achieving the American Dream, at this stage in their lives, they have not yet attained the fruits of their labors. True, the home they live in is paid for, an accomplishment many immigrant families work hard to reach without doing so, yet Papito must remain at work to sustain his family and Aurelia remains actively responsible for her children, including Marina whose nervous breakdown has essentially made her unable to live independently. Marina's mental health problems prove disastrous to the family yet they must also contend with Rebecca's refusal to acknowledge the toxicity of her relationship with Pasion, her husband. Pasion beats Rebecca mercilessly and extends the abuse by leaving her and the children in their home, utterly surrounded by filth and chickens. "Having no land, Pasion had converted the top apartment into a coop. In imitation of the American farms he'd seen surrounded by broken plows and tractors, he had cluttered the rest of the house with junk" (53). Despite multiple attempts to pull Rebecca and the children out, Aurelia has been unable to keep Rebecca with her. Their hard work and

sacrifice were not sufficient to provide their children with a carefree life in which they could then pursue dreams of their own.

Of the more than dozen children they raised, only two pursue higher education. Rather than viewing these feats as empowering, some within the family demonstrate disdain and derision. This is especially true of Iliana's continuing education. Perhaps jealousy fuels these remarks, but there is also a sense of fear of not having been enough, of condemnation of their lifestyles, of not being capable of providing happiness and fulfillment in their lives. Implicit in the derisive comments is the sense that as a female Iliana aimed too high—she should have been content to follow in the footsteps of her aunts and sisters: marry and care for her children. Having uprooted the entire family in search of a better life and more opportunities, it seems counterintuitive that Iliana's family does not push for her education. Her brother, Vicente enrolled in college before Iliana but his doing so did not elicit quite the same reaction as hers. That Iliana, a woman, is ridiculed by her family for attending college demonstrates how gender expectations play a huge role in the reactions to her education. Not only has she denied the role that was allotted her by being born a woman, but she has conveyed disdain for that role and those who fill it: or so, perhaps, some within her family feel. So too, the lack of formal education or cultural capital of her parents could have narrowed their scope of options available to all their children. Postsecondary education may not have seemed a necessity to attain success. This is not to say of course that without formal education one cannot appreciate its benefits or strive for it. There are many for whom the lack of opportunity or access to education fosters a need to advance the future generation. They instill a drive to further themselves in their children, to delve as deep as possible within their chosen fields. Still, for a family who only just secured a home, how could they have even hoped to provide a college education for each child?

Within my family, the value of education is one passed through the generations. Beginning with the generation of my grandparents, who themselves did not pursue education past middle or high school, my family inherited the cultural capital of their social class, dreamed bigger for their children as college became an important milestone. Education, the pursuit of degrees, is expected. So much of this is interconnected to the role of the economic and social status of a family. I have been lucky to be born into a family where struggling for basic necessities was not experienced. Even though the status of my family in Dominican Republic does not reflect our status in the United States, I have never found myself wanting in toys, books, etc. let alone the basic necessities of life. Having the basics established, the furtherance of our education is not only conceivable but expected. My family had the necessary status and cultural capital that comes with it to make higher education realistically attainable. Moving to the United States did not rob my branch of the family the heritage they were passed on by their family.

Yet in the case of Iliana and many others, education is not valued. Reading and coming in contact with stories that differ from my own force me to analyze the ways in which my family has had more advantages than some and to ask why. Iliana's family made sure their children never starved, but they had moments when their economic status robbed them of possibilities. The cultural capital that they inherited from their own families did not include creeds for formal education, though they did inherit other valuable legacies. That these legacies are not honored or acknowledged is what underscores much of the story. Rather, Aurelia, perhaps due to shame or fear fails to share the abilities she has inherited and passed on to her children. Not secure in her footing in New York, Aurelia clings to ideas of normalcy held by the dominant culture and denies the existence of magic so rooted in her family history, which she ultimately realizes is the basis of her strength.

## II. *Song of the Water Saints*

Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* begins in 1917, a time in which the US Marines were still stationed in the Dominican Republic and their presence is palpable throughout the majority of the book. The reader is first introduced to Graciela, a teenage girl dreaming of a turquoise house to call her own, truly yearning for something she cannot articulate, waiting for life to begin and with no clear idea of how to obtain it; she places all her dreams of a better life, of her dream house, on the men she encounters. She is disconnected both from the physical hometown where she feels forcibly bound and the home of familial bonds which too she finds burdensome. Her dreams of leaving her past, her village are viewed as foolish. The physical home itself is not a sufficient anchor to family or self-identity, which is made clear in *Geographies of Home* in the ease with which home can slip away. Having a house is not enough for Iliana, who continues her quest of finding self and family throughout the text. Yet the house can be seen as providing a place in which to begin this quest. Iliana often uses the family home to look back unto her past as she searches for identity. That Graciela expresses a desire for a little house with a turquoise zinc roof but she is never able to attain it, is symbolic of her as one of the more lost characters in the text. In a roundtable discussion with fellow Caribbean writers, Rosario relates home as a "realm of control. This is where you are able to control everything. So in your house nobody touches things, or this is where I control" ("Voices from Hispaniola" 72). That Graciela longs for a home is indicative of her desire to have control over her life. Only after years spent away when she returns to the home her daughter Mercedes has built does Graciela show signs of understanding herself. Mercedes, who does manage to build and expand on the house of her mother's dreams, is one of the more stable characters in the text. While the ability to call a place home is not enough to anchor the protagonists to family history and identity, that

Graciela never manages to live in her turquoise dream house conveys her inability to situate her identity for the majority of her story. After much trouble and heartbreak, she learns not to depend on men to fulfill her dream but this lesson does not extend through the family beyond her daughter Mercedes. By the time we reach Leila, Graciela's great granddaughter, we see a continued and active silence on the past resulting in Leila repeating many of the errors and heartbreak Graciela already experienced as she attempts to find herself.

Graciela's one desire which she can verbalize is of owning that turquoise house, but she never manages to realize it, and neither Silvio nor Casimiro are able to provide it for her. The idea of the home, the dream of obtaining it is really the best way Graciela can articulate that she yearns for more than what she has, something that is both hers and which roots her to herself. In expecting Silvio or Casimiro to give this to her, she is depending on them to define her but that is something they are unable to do. Despite all her dreaming and her attempts to live elsewhere, Graciela ultimately becomes a fixture in her village and living out her final years there. In a desperate attempt to escape the confines of her life, she runs away to Santiago. She is whisked into the city by a train, which to the minds of those in *el campo* resembles "an iron serpent... [swallowing] people, animals, cane, an' shits 'em out all over the north. Sounds like thunder an' stinks like demons" (Rosario 45). Upon arrival, the city is hit by an earthquake. The remainder of her experiences is no less eventful. Graciela is objectified, exotified, and exploited by a German French man named Eli who uses her urban inarticulateness, her apparent ignorance of city life and her desperation, to take advantage of her. Having never been outside of her *campo* much less outside of her country, Graciela easily falls prey to Eli's exaggerations of his worldliness and his suggestion that they visit an "inn" together. She does manage to escape the brothel with the help of a Haitian maid, not however before being infected with syphilis, an illness she brings back to

*el campo*. Once the illness makes itself apparent, Graciela resolves to intern at a convent, as a way of repenting and seeking asylum from her misadventures. She returns to her daughter as her end approaches. Her daughter Mercedes is portrayed as pragmatic in contrast to her mother who is viewed as a dreamer. While Graciela seems to have succumbed to the constant exploitation of her body, Mercedes shuns any attention aimed at her body and decides to marry a man whose main interest in her comes from her intellect and honest opinions. It is Mercedes and her husband Andres who manage to live a part of Graciela's dream of the turquoise house, ultimately leaving the village and starting anew in New York.

The remainder of the novel follows Leila, Mercedes' teenage granddaughter, whose journey often resembles that of Graciela. She too does not seem content with the life she leads with her grandparents, always searching for something different, for the freedom she believes men can offer her. Sadly, much like her great grandmother, Leila too is subjected to the sexual appetite of men. It seems only after repeating this cycle of exploitation is Leila open to the insight of ancestry.

### III. My home

That we always visited the Dominican Republic and stayed with family in *las casas viejas* nearly every summer certainly solidified my sense of belonging to this community. The places where we stayed were home—my ancestral homes where I can visualize the connections to my family, to me, whether because we slept where my parents did as children, ate where they ate, and played where they played, or through the photographs both displayed and stored for safekeeping—this is home. I suppose to some extent my parents felt the same—their childhood homes of course would always be Home but how much stronger of a connection must it feel when you do not feel at home in your adopted country? I know my father always envisioned

returning to the Dominican Republic, returning home once he finished working. That they remain here I attribute both to the fact that my sister and I live here but also that over the years they have created a comfortable routine. Having this connection to a physical place whose image I can conjure in my mind provides roots in which to my plant my idea of self. I look around and see the parts that have made me who I am: photographs, religious iconography, books that once belonged to my grandmother. These talismans remind me of those who once lived here and whose lessons helped shape my being: Buena Nena's voracious appetite for literature and her extensive memory which allowed her to recall details of books and photographs years after losing her sight; Buelo Tobias' sense of responsibility and work ethic which enabled him to build the family company as well as provide for the community; Papa Pedro's cleverness, jokes, but also his gentleness which prevented him from physically reprimanding Papi despite the social customs which dictated otherwise; Mama Pancha's penchant for storytelling and her forward thinking exhibited by her opening her own bank accounts, both in dollars and *pesos* at a time when such a thing was not common. These and many other attributes of my predecessors are etched on the walls and lands in *el campo*—it is this etching of memory on the physical houses, which make them Home.

### Chapter 3: OBSCURING FAMILIAL MEMORY

Both novels are linked by more than the generational shift, the focus on the matrilineal lines, the tendency that both novels have toward representing families who do not have the tradition of sharing family history, and the ways in which the characters are negatively affected by the lack/loss of this tradition. For these two families, already made vulnerable by moving to the United States and being exposed to the poverty and racism faces by so many immigrants, the disconnect from family history engendered by the practice of silence and denial further alienates

the protagonists from themselves. This practice of silence mirrors the national policy of silence in the Dominican Republic that was first instituted by President Juan Bosch. His policy of *borron y cuenta nueva*, intended to enable the country to move past the trauma of the dictatorship and encourage peace was followed by President Joaquin Balaguer “who would reinforce this repression of memory—often with violence” (Adams 28). Rather than encouraging peace and healing however, this repression of memory allowed the wounds to fester. The country’s refusal to deal with the atrocities inspired countless writers of the mid twentieth century to focus on the dictatorship and thus embrace the nation’s past.

## I. A MAGICAL LEGACY ACCEPTED

Mirroring the instituted policy of silence Aurelia, matriarch of the family in *Geographies of Home*’s has kept hidden from her entire family the truth of a gift she inherited from her mother Bienvenida, the gift of second sight repressing all the memories and lessons imparted by her mother. Bienvenida was a midwife in *el campo* in Dominican Republic but her gifts extended beyond the assistance of ushering in new life. Bienvenida was blessed with a gift that she passed on to Aurelia, her youngest child. These powers are representative of the knowledge Bienvenida attempted to instill in her child but which Aurelia rejects, closing herself and her children from it and the wisdom her mother attempted to impart on her. Bienvenida’s ability to know truths beyond what she physically sees is indicative of her security in her knowledge of family history and therefore her identity. Symbolizing the strength from understanding one’s origins, by rejecting her powers Aurelia has denied her family and herself strength and sense of belonging. Despite the warning that ignoring the past will only inflict harm, Aurelia does just that. Silencing and withholding the stories of the family results in much harm and it takes disastrous events to make Aurelia bear witness to what she purposely blinded herself —whether she is able to use

this wisdom to ultimately save her family is not certain. Though the novel ends in a way in which can be read as a promising manner, Perez does not neatly resolve all the issues of the text.

At the novel's onset, Iliana decides to return to the abode of her family and leave school. This decision is partially driven by the explicit racism she encountered at her school but it is primarily driven by the fact that she has been haunted by a disembodied voice that resembles her mother's and this voice communicates the troubles of her family. Her stay at home is a search for strength to endure prejudice. Yet, there is something greater for which she is in search, only becoming apparent as the story progresses. Though she has been in search of belonging before college and had hoped to attain it by leaving home, Iliana finds that she was even more at a loss:

She had wanted more than anything, to belong. Having spent years plotting how to leave only to discover, when she finally did, that she felt as displaced out in the world as in her parents' house; she had made the decision to return and to re-establish a connection with her family so that, regardless of where she went thereafter, she would have comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her the courage to confront the prejudices she had encountered during eighteen months away. (312)

Upon arrival and throughout her stay, Iliana is assaulted by vivid memories, examples of hostility, patience, jealousy, strength of character and the resilience of soul as she maneuvers around her family, place, and the city to find her Self, and her home.

Once home, Iliana is confronted by various changes in the appearance of the place, from the outside color scheme to the arrangement and decorum of their living room. Having been away for a year, Iliana is acutely aware of the image of the family that the home promotes. The change in décor suggests to Iliana a change in the perspective of the family, a distancing from the traditions of the Dominican Republic to incorporate more stereotypical American conceptions.

To Iliana, eyes opened wide by a year and a half's absence, the room seemed a vision of what her parents believed a rich person's house, or at least an American's, might look like. Gone were the hand-carved statuettes and worn but sturdy wooden rocking chairs and tables brought from the Dominican Republic. In their place sat a table with gold-tinted latticed bases and red and gold fringed lamps. Already Iliana felt as if her parents' home were not her own. While she'd been away, her memory had consisted of images imbued with the warmth of a Caribbean sun magically transported to New York and of a house furnished with objects lovingly carved by the inhabitants of an island she had dreamed of. (30)

In her memory of home, Iliana constructed this ideal haven, which though physically placed in New York, carried with it emblems of a distant land. This, a place representing her place in the hybrid, or hyphenated space, is what Iliana dreams of when she longs for home; a place where both her Dominican and American cultures commingled. Coming to find home and struck by this change, a change in which the remnants of the island have been erased, almost as though in an attempt to blur the influence of their past, it is not until the end of the story that Iliana realizes what home means to her. What once stood in her parents' home was not merely furniture, but representations of a nation that now seemed discarded, a connection to a warmth and magic that had encompassed her memory of the Dominican Republic. This shift away from elements that represented a traditional Dominican culture disorients Iliana further making her feel as though she is at a loss, without a home. Ultimately she comes to realize that home is not a specific place or space but an amalgamation of memories of experiences and people. While the physical spaces may not exist, her memories, which she will carry with her, will ensure the existence of home. It is this realization that allows Iliana to know herself and find the strength to move forward.

It is her longing for home, the search for the real space encompassed in memory that drives Iliana throughout the novel.

From Iliana's first chapter, we learn of a voice that has appeared to her in college. We can read this voice as the embodiment of family history/story and its attempts to reconnect to Iliana. It speaks to her of the events taking place at home and though it at first frightens her, ultimately she finds comfort in its presence and familiarity.

Initially the visitations had occurred sporadically. But as the racial slurs began appearing on Iliana's door, they increased in frequency... There in the attic room of the university whose hilltop location contrived to make her forget the rest of the world and whose courses disclaimed life as she had known it, making her feel invisible, the voice reassured Iliana of her own existence and kept her rooted. (4)

When she most feels alone, without a place in which to belong, the voice of her family reaches out, comforts her, and calls her home where she can heal the cracks of the past and fortify the self to move forward. The voice is a part of the inheritance from her mother's side, the gift of second sight, of knowing, of seeing beyond. Inkling of her inherited sight emerging are evident throughout. In remembering an earlier instance with her friend Ed, Iliana recalls how she somehow knew that he was gay. "How'd you know?" "I have no idea," she had conceded, "Somehow, I just knew" (76). Unaware of her family history, Iliana is unsure of its meaning.

By negotiating memories, perspectives, and images of family, one begins to create identity. By reviewing these lessons conveyed by family, the bearers of cultures, one can reflect on how they frame and define the self. Or such at least has been my experience. It is through the stories passed on by my parents that I formulated much of my Dominican identity, that along with my visits to my extended family on the island. Yet while I was able to construct part of my

identity to the past and customs my parents inherited from Dominican Republic, I had also to negotiate it with what I encountered daily, the culture I lived in the US: the lessons learned at school, through the books I devoured, the shows I watched, and the conversations I shared with friends. Of course, my parents too were negotiating their experiences here with their memories of Dominican Republic and the family they left behind and so my identity came to be formulated, and continues to be, through the interplay of these negotiations.

For most of her life, Aurelia cast aside her past, keeping it from her children and husband and even from herself. Yet, she is forced throughout the book to reflect on her past.

More and more Aurelia found herself remembering the distant past...It was as if, after years of setting aside memories, the pile had grown too high and had tumbled, obliging her to take an inventory of her life. As she delved into the past, she was conscious of something missing in the present—something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children. She could not identify what it was, but its absence was felt as acutely as hunger pangs. And she was determined to discover what had caused the loss and to figure out how she had brought herself to the present moment so that she might guide herself into the future.

...She had been poor even in the Dominican Republic, but something had flourished from within which had enabled her to greet each day rather than cringe from it in dread. With bare feet planted on familiar ground, she had trusted her perceptions. Yet assaulted by the unfamiliar and surrounded by hard concrete and looming buildings, she had become...vulnerable... (23)

Only on looking back at her life and thus able to see the results of her decisions does Aurelia see the harm that she inflicted on her family by remaining silent on their past. “That

Aurelia...silences her past and is ambivalent about her relationship with her own mother is what leaves her daughters at a loss. Any of them, whether it be Iliana, Rebecca, Marina or any of the other daughters, would have fared better had they been armed with certain truths rather than shielded from them" ("Voices from Hispaniola" 70). At this time in her life, Aurelia is forced to acknowledge that in hiding a part of her past, her identity, she has left herself vulnerable, empty, without the strength of her ancestors this loss has left her fearful.

She regretted...the many years she had spent running from her heritage as if the past had the power to transform her into a pillar of salt...

So many lessons she had refused to learn because they had been taught to her by her mother. She recalled Bienvenida's claim that the devil was one's own fears called forth by self-doubt...It was these powers which she had spurned so many years before and which her soul had ached for.

...She turned critical eyes on herself and picked apart each of her deepest fears. (Perez 135)

Aurelia had first to accept the inheritance of her mother Bienvenida to realize that she has the power to take control. Aurelia comes to terms with her past and is better able to understand herself and her role. Shame led Aurelia to deny her mother's teachings and in fact keep the history of her family from her husband and children.

It did not matter that she herself felt [spirits'] presence as tangibly as she did the breezes which in summer arrived at sunset and lasted only until dawn or that throughout her visit she had lain awake at night listening to their voices and hearing her mother's respon[ses]...

Aurelia considered what her mother had already bequeathed to her: an ability to perceive the invisible that only she and Virgilio from among their siblings, had inherited. This ability was what had driven her brother mad and had tormented her into seeing and hearing what others couldn't. She wanted no more of such a legacy. ...she had vowed not to follow in his path or even in her mother's. For this reason she had converted to her husband's religion and had shared with him little of her past. She wanted simply to live her life and upon dying to stand before God as one of the meek, not one of the rebellious led astray by abilities she dared not trust. (133-134)

She fears her past, her inherited abilities, and so Aurelia hides it from her loved ones, consciously erasing it from her memory along with the legacy of her brother. She ignores the warnings of her mother, of the dangers of denying your history. "Because the future can hurt if you deny the past," [Bienvenida] murmured. "Because I want you never to forget..." (132). Aurelia comes to see the wisdom of her mother's words but only after years of toil and the misfortunes of her daughters.

She also thought of the many more things she had never revealed to her children or her grandchildren: details of their own and their family's past which might have helped them better understand themselves as well as the world through which they moved. The silence enveloping these legacies, the half-truths meant to gloss over and protect, the falsehoods uttered for fear of causing pain, and the inability or unwillingness to speak, now seemed to her to have inflicted greater harm.

Look at her grandchildren who harbored fragmented views of their lives and blamed themselves for circumstances over which they had no control; at their mother who continued to believe herself unworthy because of misunderstandings originating as

far back as her childhood; at Iliana perplexed by traits she had inherited from her grandmother but had been told nothing at all about. (298)

Only by realizing the emptiness and uncertainty that plagued her family and how the lack of knowledge of their familial past and legacy played a role in these, does Aurelia finally decide to begin sharing and take hold of her inheritance to help steer her family's present and future. After having accepted her inheritance, Aurelia is not thwarted by the stare of Soledad, but rather comes to the realization that she has the power.

...it dawned on her that she had it in her to do much more than try. She actually had the resources to succeed...Obstacles she had set up for herself, justifications born out of a hope that problems would right themselves on their own, and dread of the consequences of interfering each toppled in one fell swoop as she confronted what she had hoped to keep secret from herself. Yes. She could arrange for her daughter to leave Pasion once and for all. She could even vanquish him from their lives in such a way that no one else would be the wiser as to how it had been done. (250)

Implicit in these passages is Aurelia's understanding that to understand who she is she must have the information of the family's past. Their actions, their circumstances lead to our own and by understanding these connections we can best steer our paths.

But there is a second lesson Aurelia must accept—that she cannot alter what has happened, nor fix the problems for her children. In her attempt to rid Rebecca of Pasion, she may have strengthened his hold over her forever. Yet she realizes that by sharing the truth of their history, she may be able to provide a different path for Rebecca's children. "By uttering one of the many truths now, Aurelia might undo the lie her eldest daughter had told her grandchildren. She might absolve them of their guilt..." (298). Although she might not be able to undo the

damages Rebecca has endured, Aurelia realizes she can at least right the wrongs inflicted on the next generation and perhaps direct them away from the life Rebecca leads.

## II. ANCESTRAL WISDOM

Sharing of family history is not much practiced by Graciela of *Songs of the Water Saints*. Her focus is often on escaping the constraints of her life, “[searching] for her identity” (“Traveling Saints: Nelly Rosario explores familial ties in her debut novel *Song of the Water Saints*” 34) and she does in fact manage to leave *el campo* for a short time when she flees to Santiago. As a young girl, Graciela already expresses a desire to live a different life from that which she shares with her family. Upon seeing a globe during catechism, she is entranced by the idea of the world’s immensity and possibility. “¿But how much bigger could the world be when the head of a tiny animal was her world? Graciela’s fingers traced mountain ridges and the dips of rivers” (Rosario 27). As she grows older, Graciela continues to want more from life but seems to place all her hopes on the men who come into her life. Her own mother warns Graciela against this but Graciela refuses to pay heed for she fears doing so would bind her.

Go on after men, if you think that’s freedom. End up worse than where you started, Mai had shouted after Graciela the day she followed Silvio. And then Mai hissed the same warning in her ear when Graciela opened her doors to Casimiro.

And now Mai’s voice echoed in Graciela’s mind again as Eli sat up next to her on the bed and scribbled in a small notebook. Graciela was propped up on an elbow, studying him while she tried rubbing the soreness from her labia. Mai always spoke in Graciela’s mind, but Graciela tried to pulverize the words just as quickly as they came. Otherwise, the words would tie her hands and feet together. (79-80)

Her refusal to listen to this warning due to this fear is unfortunate for it is her very depending on men to free her which binds her to a life she does not want and ultimately brings about her early death. This refusal to acknowledge and heed the wisdom of one's elders is a trait inherited by Leila, Graciela's great-granddaughter who unknowingly repeats the errors of her ancestor.

At first there is Silvio, Graciela's "sepia prince" (9) with whom she wants to run away and build a turquoise home. Together they are approached by a yanqui-man named Peter who wants to photograph them in erotic poses. Unsure at first, Silvio's whispered reminder of her hopes results in Graciela acquiescing to this request: "¿You still want to go away with me, Mami, or no...Graciela's shoulders dropped" (10). Despite agreeing to this and earning those pesos, Graciela never sees the money-Silvio spends it. That Graciela is swept up by the decisions of the men around her is a flaw that is apparent throughout the text. In hoping to find the freedom for which she longs and resting these hopes on men, Graciela continuously finds herself bound. After the encounter with Peter, Silvio does eventually come back to Graciela.

Like sudden thunder, Silvio invaded her home in his fresh yanqui haircut and pushed aside Pai's machete while Graciela ran past her shrunken mother to gather her few belongings.

...He knew Graciela was disappointed to find that, instead of the turquoise palmwood and zinc house behind her lids, their new place was not much different from the thatched cabins she had left behind...

...Within a year of their eloping, the fever...had dwindled to predictable lukewarm pleasure during siesta and after sundown. Graciela was no longer Silvio's, despite his having her under a roof and being able to hitch up her skirt at will....Silvio felt he had lost Graciela to a world bigger than himself. (20-21)

Despite the exciting elopement, Graciela finds herself very much in the same place from which she just escaped.

Silvio does not remain with Graciela for long before embarking on a seafaring job. This new employment guarantees little time at home with Graciela and would come to claim his life. After his last visit home, Graciela finds herself expecting and decides that upon his next return, she must more forcefully call on Silvio to bring about her dream of the turquoise house.

The new life inside her pulled her daydreams down from the clouds. Up north in the pulse of the country, they could build a bright turquoise palmwood house with a zinc roof for their new family. She would wait for Silvio's return, and then convince him, and if he did not join her, she would leave without him, and take up washing or cleaning until the child was born. Then she would make her palmwood house, and call on Silvio to show him that she was not a woman to be kept sitting and waiting idly for her life to happen.

(30)

Though we do see Graciela ponder on leaving Silvio to bring about the dream herself, she continues to relate her decision back to Silvio as she purports to use her actions to show him what he failed to do rather than enacting change in her life for herself and daughter. Silvio never returns or learns of his daughter's existence.

Later, Graciela meets Casimiro and once again hopes that he will fulfill her dreams. Even with Casimiro who is a seemingly better option for Graciela, she does not get the turquoise house, nor is she able to travel despite his promise.

When they first met, Graciela had made Casimiro promise to take her places. She refused to be confined to the market, the river, and neighboring households, but she knew that to wander further by herself would get her branded 'a woman with loose skins.' ...Casimiro

could show her no more than what he knew: other people's belongings, tall tales, and sparkling eyes. Winks, jokes, and many apples later, Graciela's feet began to itch again. Each time Graciela took the long walk to the market, thoughts of deserting Casimiro and Mercedita perched on her shoulders. It was during these solitary walks that her courage would bubble up." (56)

Upon realizing that Casimiro cannot offer her what she dreams, Graciela decides to leave, abandoning her daughter Mercedes with Casimiro.

The idea of escaping was eating away at Graciela every night...On one particular night, the idea had itched so much, she rubbed camphor into the reddened soles of her feet...

The camphor seeped into her skin. And Graciela decided to forget tomorrow, to take a leap. Wake at dawn. Make the sign of the cross. Skip bathing. She would borrow Casi's stash of bills, fill that hatbox, and follow the back road. Find a way to La Vega. (62-63)

This is perhaps the closest that Graciela comes to obtaining her own freedom, but on her journey she is once again thwarted by a man, Eli, who is clearly after satiating his sexual appetite.

--But you yourself seem to be running. You would be first in exile when the pan got too hot, Eli countered.

--¿What do you know of my problems, Seno? Graciela sucked her teeth.

Eli gauged his questions. He gave her his full attention as she told him her dream of a turquoise house and her ideas as to why the yanquis should let the country be. She told him she wanted to learn to read, and to ride a ship someday.

Eli mined the smallness of her world....

--Never stayed at an inn before, she said, answering his bold question in one breath. (71)

On reaching Santiago, an earthquake hit-scattering many into unplanned paths. Graciela follows Eli to the “inn” where he preps her for sex. In this encounter, Graciela does attempt to take ownership of her pleasure but Eli effectively stops this.

In bed Eli sniffed her. A beast on a hunt. As she lay on her stomach, Eli’s sour-milk smell stung Graciela’s nostrils when he pushed himself inside of her. Holding her thighs closer together buffered the burn. She tried grinding herself against the bed to own some of the pleasure. With the heel of his hand, Eli pressed the small of her back until Graciela felt a place deep inside her yield and she could not move. (79)

For an instant, Graciela thinks back to her mother’s warning: “Perhaps Mai had been right. Men were no freer, for all their mobility. How ridiculous to have expected Silvio, Casimiro or even the fool beside her to hand her a world that was not theirs to give” (80). Graciela only manages to escape the brothel to which Eli brought her by the aid of the Haitian maid:

—I’ll tell you this. Leave here if you love your life. That yanqui and La Pola only have nastiness after you, the woman whispered after she had made a neat knot and bitten off the excess thread. Graciela stroked the stitches.

--Trust me. Tears won’t save you. I help you only because I have an account to settle with La Altagracia. (83)

Though Graciela does seem to begin to understand the wisdom of her mother’s words, her encounter with Eli infects with syphilis, which will take her life before she turns 30. Graciela does return home for a time before running away again to seek comfort at a convent. On her final return, she finds that Casimiro has passed and that Mercedes has taken ownership of the house along with her partner Andres.

Graciela often found herself frustrated with her life and with the passivity of the townspeople.

Despite momentary pangs of homesickness, Graciela preferred the uncertainty of wanderlust to the dreariness of routine. Too much passion and curiosity for her own good, Mai and Pai always told her...People back home were simply too content being the spectators of their own lives. (86-87)

Though she criticizes the townspeople for their supposed passivity in life, she is not entirely successful in becoming an active agent in hers. While she does at times attempt to take control of her life, ultimately her dependence on men results in her never having obtained the type of life/identity she wanted.

Unlike her mother, Mercedes is able to situate herself in her identity. Though Mercedes never has the benefit of sage wisdom from Graciela, she is still able to learn from Graciela's life. A present eye, Mercedes watches her mother closely. Much of this stemmed from the fear of being abandoned again by her wanderlust-ful mother. Fearing that she may cause her mother's displeasure, Mercedes learns to bottle up her emotions. While Mercedes is able to learn from observing Graciela, she thirsts to learn more about her family; this curiosity is most evident when she learns that Casimiro is not her biological father. One of the earliest instances in which Graciela silences the past is her refusal to share with Mercedes the truth of her parentage. Having grown up with Casimiro as the male figure in the household, Mercedes believed he was her father-and in essence he was more a parent to her than Graciela. Not until Santa, a neighbor for whom Mercedes laundered, mentions that Silvio was her father does Mercedes have any inkling as to the truth. When confronted by her daughter, Graciela silences her, refusing to further discuss the topic. Still, Mercedes persists in ascertaining the truth of her parentage and searches

Graciela's belongings for a clue. In a hatbox that had travelled with Graciela to Santiago, Mercedes finds a photograph, which she mistakenly believes to be of her father. She finds within a photograph of a young couple and believes the white man to be her father Silvio. This discovery along with Mustafa's, a local vendor who teaches Mercedes math and ultimately passes on his business to her, racist diatribe result in Mercedes holding racist views and ideas of superiority. Mercedes' tendency to bottle up her emotions which she does to keep her mother from leaving aggravate these flaws—the only instances during which we see Mercedes reacting emotionally are in times of anger, first when she beats a little girl in black face for Carnaval and then when she encourages the beating of a young Haitian boy.

She felt an odd delight at seeing the boy in pain—such a weak and skulking boy. Her mouth watered and her fists tightened...

Later, after Mustafa had sent him away sobbing...he explained to Mercedita that Haitians could not be trusted. Animals, he said they were, who had, in their twenty-year rule, destroyed the fabric of the country by expelling its best white families... (107)

Further suggesting that these violent reactions are tied to her self-repressive tendencies that she believed kept her mother around is that the final time we see her act similarly is at Graciela's funeral. "Mercedes howled, releasing the white-hot rage she had suppressed. She arched out her arm in an overdue fist on the corpse's chest, and pounded..." (177). She refrained from expressing how she felt while her mother lived for fear of being abandoned but once Graciela is dead and her corpse is before her, Mercedes releases all those pent-up fears and frustrations.

Graciela's inability to fully articulate her dreams beyond owning the turquoise house, representing control of self, is further evinced in that she never knows what she stands for, or

who she wants to be; to most she seemed flighty and a hopeless dreamer. Mercedes, who compares herself and is compared to her mother, learns what she does not want to be.

Mercedes stood her ground, despite harsh comparison with that ‘mare-assed runaway mother of hers.’ Neighbors, then, made sure to keep sharp eyes on the comings and goings about the house. By washing and ironing clothes from her home, and sometimes helping Mustafa in the kiosk, Mercedes was able to eat decent meals with no other orders but from God Himself. (158)

Mercedes actively creates an image that is opposed to that which her mother presented; one that is stable, dedicated, loyal, smart. “After feeling so unwanted by Graciela, Mercedes did her best to find her own worth: an ability with numbers and the reputation of a God-fearing hardworking girl were strongholds she herself had erected...” (162). Having learned by watching Graciela and learning what not to embody, Mercedes is able to build a life that brings her success, a loving husband and children. By choosing a life utterly different from Graciela’s, Mercedes is able to live out the life of which her mother dreamed, including the ability to travel beyond *el campo* demonstrated in Mercedes’ move to New York to raise her granddaughter Leila.

In reaching Leila’s story, the trauma of withholding ancestral wisdom is glaringly obvious. Graciela dreamed of defining herself and attaining freedom from her life through men. Leila grows up in New York and despite living in a completely different environment from and having more opportunities than Graciela, seems doomed to repeat Graciela’s path. Interested and talented in science, but otherwise bored by life, Leila dreams of excitement which she believes can only be brought about by men. We see Mercedes try to share a bit of their family history but very much like Graciela, Leila wants nothing of the past.

Yes, I ...had the sharpest mind... if there's one thing I know is to marry smart, get one who you know will never double-cross you... You have to be smart, my sweet girl, you have to be smart in life.

...Always remember the things I tell you.

“Nah, ‘Buela, I live for the now. Everyone’s either telling me to remember stuff I never lived, or to prepare for some who-knows future...”

To Leila, those who carried the past carried the dead, and those who chased the future died of cardiac arrest. (208-209)

Leila shuns the words of warnings of her elders, refusing the lessons Graciela experienced and Mercedes witnessed. She focuses on the present, refusing to acknowledge or care for the ways in which the events of the past can continue to affect the present and how both shape the future. It is not simply Leila’s refusal to heed her grandmother’s warning though that demonstrates how the past is silenced but the way in which the experiences that elicit these warnings are withheld. Mercedes’ inability or refusal to explain the circumstances around which these lessons are learned can be linked to her own ancestors’ failure to do the same. Graciela’s mother may have warned against her dependence on men but the experiences that she may have lived that resulted in her learning this are not conveyed either to us or to Graciela.

Very much like her great grandmother, Leila dreams of a more exciting and liberating life, one which she expects to be delivered by men. Indeed, after inviting her crush to join her at a club, Leila “looked up and felt the span of wings” (224). She is uncertain of her identity, and rests defining herself on her experiences with men. Leila seeks in others, particularly men, the freedom she cannot obtain for herself. She begins an affair with a married man living in her building. Hoping to encounter the sexual experiences touted in romance novels, she visits a

motel with this man, Miguel, and there loses her virginity in a manner that leaves her feeling cheated. This experience is reminiscent of Graciela's encounter with Eli in Santiago. Both men use these young girls to satisfy their own sexual desires without any effort to share the enjoyment. Both look to these girls as objects, describing them as though they were food. Much like Graciela, Leila plunges into the desires of a man, Miguel who lives in the building and is both husband and father, in hopes that he will liberate her, make her feel whole. Unfortunately, Leila finds herself cheated by the experience.

And that was when Leila knew there was no turning back. She was on her queasy own to lean over and kiss Miguel full on the lips, though bile bittered her throat...it all happened fast as catechism filmstrips...

Miguel returned his hand to the wheel to make the tight turn into the Jardin Motel's parking lot. No gardens inside the Jardin Motel. Plastic vines hung from paneled walls...

Room 32 was dismal. A lumpy bed. No sample-sized lotions or soaps for Leila to pocket, and certainly no Bible inside the night table...

Miguel...pulled her to him by her shoulders and threw her on the bed...

--Take off your clothes, slut, he motioned and smacked her thighs...

Miguel straddled her while fumbling with the rest of his clothing. Leila remembered once rushing up to a silver dollar on the pavement that turned out to be a circle of spittle. Miguel was in his boxers, tugging at the pins in her hair. She fought him, until all that was left of her was panting and thoughts of Mercedes lovingly combing out her knots by the one-eyed piggy.

...Gaining her trust with gentle kisses, he was soon rough again. His cries were guttural, as Leila floated back to the ceiling and waited by the curtain rods.

...Spicy videotapes in the wee hours. Curled romances on her bookshelf. Lunchtime braggadeering. Cheated, she felt, and she hated Mirangeli and Elsa for their stupidity about It, and cursed Ms. Valenza for teaching It, and damned everyone else for celebrating. (230-234)

Had Leila known of Graciela's own experience of exploitation by an older, lustful man, perhaps she could have kept herself away from Miguel, not found his allure enticing but rather poisonous; if she had known that her great grandmother had died at so young an age as a direct result of her sexual misadventure, perhaps Leila would not have left her friends' company at the club for that of Miguel's. Rather than trying to "be a woman" (203), Leila could have been content being a child. Leila unfortunately, seems adamant in distancing herself from the past; despite attempts by Mercedes to share in some of her story, Leila vehemently shuts her down. Both Graciela and Leila share this trait, this dislike of the past, refusal to listen to the wisdom of those who came before.

Besides their shared dependence on men to make life worthwhile, both Graciela and Leila seem to lack a strong sense of self. They do not only depend on men to deliver freedom but for these men to define who they should be, what their identities are. Mercedes on the other hand who had some hold of her familial history obtained by her constant watchfulness is able to form a strong self of identity. It is unfortunate that she is unable to vocalize the lessons she witnessed to prevent Leila's repeating Graciela's path. There are instances in the text where Graciela's spirit attempts to reach through the veil between the living and the dead to share some semblance of wisdom to her descendent. Much like *Geographies of Home*, the voice of family history

reaches past the constraints of time. Before beginning Leila's story, the chapter "Circles" outlines a conversation between Leila and Graciela:

Graciela's ghost is not a shadow, or a shiver, or a statue falling from an altar. It is not a white sheet with slits for eyes, or a howl in the wind. It is not in the eerie highlights of a portrait, or in the twitch of a nerve...

'I wanna be a woman.'

--Then, Leila, take off that skin.

'Get outta those clouds, Greatest-of-the-Grandmamajamas...'

--Take it off. To the bottom, disrespectful child.

'Such an apodysofiliac, with all this naked stuff.'

--¡Ah! Don't talk to your elder of letters now.

'Everyone takes me seriously when I enunciate.'

--Shed the troubles of life.

'What'll be left of me then?'

--Bones...

'Will you put my ass back together again?'

--Of course...

--Keep your heart. ¿What's inside?

'Ventricles and the venae cavae...'

--No, Leila, let's bleed your heart for truth." (202-203)

Graciela seems to push Leila to look within, strip herself of exterior layers that enclose the self within, to find her truth, but Leila does not take heed.

#### Chapter 4: RECLAIMING ONE'S NARRATIVE THROUGH GAZE

Both texts provide examples in the power of the gaze, especially in reclaiming self and reconnecting to the family narrative. Rather than simply a tool of objectification inflicted on the female body, Perez and Rosario demonstrate the ways in which the gaze can act as the vehicle through which the protagonists begin to reclaim and empower themselves. Though both display the ways in which the characters are objectified by the gaze of others, the more significant moments are those in which these characters enact the gaze. Unlike those who objectify these women, when the women's gaze fall upon another, it is not to own the object of the gaze but to reflect on their memories, on what has brought them to this moment, and ultimately how to reconcile their stories to that of their ancestral past. The ending of both texts suggest that having begun to grasp the past and its significance in their lives, a better future lies ahead.

Unlike Perez and Rosario who primarily portray the gaze as a method of empowerment, the gaze has generally been conveyed as a tool of objectification and subjugation. The connection between the gaze and power has often been examined in academia. "The objects and perpetrators of the gaze are not always clear in an urban environment" (Koskela 252), which can complicate power relations. Foucault's theory of the panopticon adeptly conveys the power behind the ability of one to gaze on another. Within the panoptic prison, with the all-seeing tower, the prisoners who are being subjected to the scrutiny and discipline of the gaze do not know specifically when or who is perpetuating the gaze. In this uncertainty, the prisoners essentially police themselves, having internalized their own subjugation. In her article, Hille Koskela delves into the power of the gaze through her study of the effect that visual technical surveillance plays in an urban setting. In this scenario, the cameras, in lieu of the present watchtower, symbolize the gaze of the city, of those purportedly in power; it is their intended

purpose to maintain order and ensure the safety of the city's citizens. It is interesting to note how the object of the gaze is affected, as Koskela suggests: "the camera [representative of the gaze] leaves its object entirely as an object: passive, without any ability to influence the situation" (249). Its image recorded for posterity, leaves the object unable to alter it.

One need not only turn to video surveillance as representations of the power of the gaze. Indeed, Koskela also notes mirrors as a manner of the gaze: "In some metro stations in Helsinki, the mirrors on the wall are windows through which the guards can see the public. Few people know this, and even if they do, it is impossible to tell whether there is someone inside or not. Urban space is hence becoming less predictable" (250). The effect that gaze, and the uncertainty of who has the power and when is telling, in that urban space, urban consciousness is constructed by the numerous encounters between strangers; within these unfamiliar encounters, there is similarly an uncertainty in the others' gaze. In the case of Helsinki, the mirrors are in fact windows through which one can view the passengers of the metro, but it is interesting to consider how actual mirrors might play in the conversation of power and gaze. If you are both subject and object, and identity can be expressed as partially formed in dealings with the power relations between self and other, how is identity negotiated? How is power managed? How does the self-gaze disrupt the relations between power and gaze, if in fact it does?

Koskela adds too to the discussion of interconnectedness of gaze and power the issue of gender and power. "There is some voyeuristic fascination in looking, in being able to see. And scrutiny is a common and effective form of harassment. In urban space, women are the ones likely to be looked at—the objects of gaze. Looking connotes power, being looked at, powerlessness. Harassment makes the gaze reproduce the embodiment and sexualization of

women” (255). Indeed, in the analysis of the texts, the female body is objectified and exploited by the gaze of the other.

In part, the power behind the gaze is the power or ability of knowing, “the ability to see affords the basic condition for collecting knowledge and for being in control” (252-253). The ability of one to view, to look, to play spectator at the other is a manner of exerting the power one might have over the other, such as the power that guards hold over prisoners in the panoptic prison. Those subjected to the gaze are merely “passive subjects in a container [the image produced by the camera or the reflection upon a mirror] they are subjects in a position of not knowing their own being” (250). Not only is being an object transfixed to this idea of powerlessness, but the idea that not knowing oneself, being unaware of one’s identity is akin to powerlessness.

In various encounters in *Geographies of Home*, we see both Aurelia and Rebecca shy away from the gaze of others, trying to hide from themselves the truth upon which they know those eyes will shine. For Aurelia, being the object of her mother’s gaze is unbearable; she does not want to be read, known. “Bienvenida watched her with such intensity that Aurelia was sure her gaze penetrated to her very core. Unwilling to withstand such scrutiny, she stepped outside... When her mother followed, she shut her eyes against her” (133). Rebecca too finds herself unable to withstand the gaze of another, in her case, that of her youngest, Soledad.

Soledad solemnly watched her mother. She was... the most reserved. To Rebecca, she seemed the most disrespectful. Whenever Soledad focused on her—sunken eyes contracting while the rest of her features remained still—Rebecca had the impression of being judged. She’d feel claustrophobic and her throat would constrict, as if she were

being forced to swallow not only the failure she'd become but also the arrogance of a child reminding her of it. (58)

Rebecca cannot accept the truth she sees in her daughter's gaze—that she has failed to protect her children, to provide them with a stable and healthy life. She is not yet ready to be held accountable for her life nor the lives of her children.

However, being the object of the gaze is not always a role of powerlessness or shame. My father, as a singer and performer revels in the gaze of others. He is both object and author of the gaze—he controls the image before them, how much of him they are allowed to see is up to him. There is one story of a showcase which I have always thoroughly enjoyed. My father was informed by one of his teachers at the last minute that he would be performing at Jefferson Hall. Rushing from his job to the hall, Papi confirmed with his teacher that he would have both sufficient time and clothing to re-attire to a more suitable outfit for the performance. However, my father found himself thrown in without the chance to make himself presentable. An important fact about my father is that he prefers to be dressed well at all times; to not be so is one of his pet peeves. Having found himself in such a situation, Papi made a deal with the man in charge of the spot light that while on stage, the light would only grace his face. Once the performance began, however, it seemed that the deal so recently made had slipped the mind of the light-man (I am trying to give this stranger the benefit of the doubt). This did not prove a setback for Papi; ever ready for a challenge, my father added a slight choreography to his performance which was not planned, confusing the light-man who desperately tried to keep up.

My father had performed at the aforementioned Jefferson Hall, the American Hotel, Beacon Theater, Night Club el Patio in Queens and many other venues before his show at Carnegie Hall. None, however, hold the same import and gravitas to my Papi than that night in

an autumn many years ago. It took nearly a decade of studying, practicing, and competing for my father to arrive at the hallowed halls of Carnegie Hall.

September 20th, 1980, Cesar Del Campo, my father's stage name, walked onto the stage ready to perform the seven songs he had meticulously and passionately prepared at the event titled "Un aporte a la cultura y al arte dominicano." He shared the stage with two others, Freddy Nunez and Ulises Amoros, but it was his performance that reporter Luis G. Pichardo would note electrified the audience. Much like during its opening night so many years ago, this performance on September 20th had the hall packed with audience members at full capacity. They would remain, enthused, exulted for the next four hours.

How much of Papi's ability to revel in the limelight, as object of the gaze, is related to his gender or simply the role of performer is hard to say. Papi likes very much to be in control of his persona both on stage and off. He constructs the image upon which the audience gazes. Perhaps the inability to be a passive object comes from Papi's assuredness of who he is and from where he comes.

In the novels of Perez and Rosario, the act of gazing when enacted by the protagonists provides the power to claim a connection to family history and identity; the act promotes self-reflection that sheds light on the disconnect, and for some gives access to the power needed to resolve and begin to heal the harm inflicted by the silenced history.

Iliana returns home to uncover the strength she needs to survive, a strength she feels is embedded in her parents. Gazing upon the photographs in the living room, she reaches a photograph of her parents in which she identifies the power she lacks and the past she was denied.

...she had since learned that her mother was far stronger than she'd supposed and that hearts relentlessly pumped blood even as brains recoiled from whatever horror was presented.

...Iliana raised her eyes to the enlarged copy of the photo [of Aurelia and Papito]...They neither smiled nor frowned but gazed unflinchingly at the camera as if prepared to confront whatever challenges life might throw their way...their eyes suggested stories only waiting to be told. Iliana ached to hear those stories. Knowing little of her parents' lives, she wanted to learn of the past of which they rarely spoke. She also wanted to borrow from both the strength she saw reflected in their eyes. (44)

Iliana feels the loss inflicted by the censoring of the past. She yearns for it, knowing that with it she may find the self-assurance she lacks. Iliana's journey forces her to remember the struggles endured by her family, the difficulty with which her parents contended to raise their brood of children in an unforgiving city, the work put in by her parents that finally secured them the brownstone, all this which enables her to come to terms with her parents' vulnerability and accept that her life is her own and she must take responsibility for it.

Iliana's return home forces her to revisit places and memories she had long ago forgotten. In her encounters with family and others, the act of gazing, rather than simply an act of objectifying or making powerless the other, allows for a scope of self-reflection which is integral to her journey. In the literature of gaze, often the female is the object of the gaze, the one being scrutinized or judged, for the benefit and pleasure of man. Iliana is certainly objectified throughout the novel especially by most of the male characters and some of the female characters with regard to her walk. Only when alone does she feel able to walk in her way, without fear of scrutiny.

Except for a few other students, the campus was desolate. It was at such moments that she enjoyed it most. She was able to walk, unashamed of the stride that had caused her grief since childhood and that she had tried her damndest to change since then. But, no matter what, her hips thrust forward and swayed as if unhinged. Her friend Ed had described the stride as regal, her sisters as whorish. And it was they whom Iliana tended to believe. (5)

However, Iliana is not powerless—she too is the subject of the gaze and in this role, she turns inwards. As she waits for the next train, Iliana is confronted by such a moment of self-reflection as she gazes on the homeless nearby.

In a lot below, large boxes, insulated with rags and cardboard, served as shelter for the homeless. Beside these, a man lay curled inside a gutted refrigerator...

A woman and child emerged from one of the larger boxes. Both of them were bundled from head to toe in clothes soiled to shades of grey...The woman led the child to the rear of the lot where barren shrubs separated it from the fenced-in playground of an elementary school. She squeezed herself between the fence and branches not dense enough to hide her. Turning and crouching so that Iliana for the first time saw the sharp features of her thirty-something face, she gestured for the child to do the same...[Iliana] had the impression not only that the child was unaccustomed to urinating or defecating in a lot, but also that it was the shamed by having to witness the woman doing publicly what should have been a private act ... They gazed at each other for what were only moments but for Iliana seemed a lifetime during which she remembered more than she would willingly have allowed. (68-69)

This encounter in which Iliana is made witness to this family's shame, forces Iliana to remember. The gaze, acknowledgment that Iliana was present, observant, implicit in the act but in a different way for Iliana holds the power—it is she who watches, gazes, judges the other woman who has through necessity made herself vulnerable (both literally as she has exposed her body as well as metaphorically as she has invited another to observe her poverty). Iliana has been made privy to the hardships this woman faces and must unfortunately pass on to her daughter. It is interesting to consider, in examining the character of Iliana, the idea of the flaneur “as [it] descends to us from Baudelaire, Henry James and Walter Benjamin, knows the city through desultory wandering, and a trajectory which catches the transitoriness and ephemerality of the modern city” (Tallack 30). Yet in the case of Iliana, it is not the knowing of the city which the journey seeks to uncover but knowing her past, her family and thusly to better know herself. Confronting this blatant challenge to conceived decorum, Iliana is forced to remember moments of hardship in her own life.

Ever since her return to New York she had rushed past homeless people asking for money on corners and on trains. Not wanting to be reminded of the nights she had gone to bed hungry only to sleepwalk to the refrigerator to gnaw a piece of cheese or guzzle the remains of a gallon of milk her mother had been rationing out to last the week, she had learned to look away. Now she found herself remembering the summers when she, Tico, Beatriz and Marina had waited on line for the free meals distributed by the city and had then hurried into other neighborhoods to stand on other lines... With a shudder, she also recalled the unheated apartment where she had slept weighted by blankets beside her sisters and had nonetheless felt the relentless cold seep into her bones...

These memories made her wonder where she and her family would have been had her father not managed to save, throughout years of scrimping, the three hundred dollars with which he had purchased their current home. (69-70)

Encountering these inconsistencies throughout the story forces Iliana to negotiate the memories she has long tried to escape, a past that is intimately inscribed in the city that she is now travelling, to come to terms with the identity of her family, with who she is. She comes to understand aspects of the past which she did not understand then, the sacrifices her parents endured to save for a better future. “Only now did she understand why her mother had reused every bit of oil...had mended and remended their clothes until the fabric could not withstand the prick or pull of needle and thread” (70). It is by facing these memories that she is able to appreciate what her parents managed to do, the hard work to save while ensuring their children would not starve, and which allows her to see her family as human beings shaped by circumstances sometimes out of their control. “She was also struck by the absurdity of having considered herself superior, as if, unlike the woman, she would forever be in control of her destiny and would never suffer a misfortune for which she might need the help of others” (71).

Iliana of course is not the only member of her family for which gazing upon others is a path to better understanding the self. Aurelia too succumbs to moments of reflection as she gazes upon patients in the hospital waiting room while Marina, who had just attempted suicide for the third time, is being treated. What ultimately inspires Aurelia to accept a part of her so long denied was her time at the hospital emergency room in which she encounters misery and pain she had so often tried to avert, much like Iliana’s acknowledgment of the homeless.

Victims of all types of diseases, disorders and infirmities; several who appeared to have overdosed on drugs; a few sporting gun and knife wounds, sprawled and slumped throughout the room. Aurelia gazed unflinchingly at each.

Never again would she avert her eyes. Never again would she recoil in fear. In the presence of strangers like those she had sheltered herself from...and in a hospital worlds removed from the New York depicted on postcards her eldest daughter had mailed to the Dominican Republic, Aurelia for the first time granted herself permission to sprout roots past concrete soil. Throughout more than fifteen years of moving from apartment to apartment, she had dreamed, not of returning, but of going home. Of going home to a place not located on any map but nonetheless preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home. (136-137)

Forced to witness these people in pain, Aurelia releases the fear that had inhibited her from accepting her legacy. It is here that she comes to realize not only her power but the harm she has inflicted upon her children and their children by her denial to share her past. "She accepted full responsibility for this daughter's choice prompted by her negligence...From that day on she would hold only herself accountable. She would no longer depend on anyone else to do for her or her children what she should have taken it upon herself to do" (137). Aurelia is repeatedly reminded of this throughout the novel until she finally acts to restore Rebecca's life.

As she prepares the chickens for their Christmas feast, Aurelia flexes her power, extends the scope of her gaze outward, beyond the confines of her kitchen, her brownstone until she comes upon Pasion:

Vaguely at first, then clearer as the seconds passed, she was able to make out the details of his face. She withdrew far enough to see the entirety of his giant's height and smiled with grim satisfaction when she recognized his surroundings as the third-floor coop of the house to which her daughter meant to return. By venturing there, Pasion had done just as she'd willed.

She watched him...she decided that she wanted him to see her too. She wanted him to know that what was about to occur was not mere chance but had been purposefully willed by her...As she'd intended, he saw her...He immediately blinked to banish the vision...Yet... [he] saw her clearly.

...[S]he seized a handful of feathers and yanked them out...The chickens that had languished half dead throughout the coop simultaneously leapt up on their three-clawed feet. Their squawks shattered the silence.

Pasion stumbled...He fell to his knees and fumbled in a pocket for his inhaler...[The chickens] lashed out at Pasion, pecking at his face, his hands, his wrists...as he crawled from the room to collapse on the third-floor landing.

...She sailed towards him.....His fear was palpable. It distorted his mouth and collapsed his lungs. (255-256)

Aurelia has taken hold of her power, of her family inheritance and enacted vengeance for her daughter and grandchildren. Bringing about his death is not enough however; Aurelia decides that Pasion must be witness to the cause, must understand who has conjured his death. With her power, she forces him to gaze upon her, to see her visage as she determinedly brings about his end.

It is with her newfound strength and powers that Aurelia finds the ability to not only protect her eldest from future harm at the hands of Pasion but avenge his many cruelties and injustices so often inflicted on Rebecca and the children. Using the powers inherited from Bienvenida and thus finally accepting her familial identity, Aurelia ends Pasion's life, trapping him in the home in which he intended to confine and degrade Rebecca, his final prison and execution stand. "To remind you that in our blood we carry the power of the sea, she heard Bienvenida say. To quell your fear of darkness and teach your spirit that it can soar" (299). By accepting her past, she finds the strength that enables her to enact her role as protective mother.

Still, Pasion's death does not readily resolve all of Rebecca's problems. When Rebecca finds his body, gazing upon the man who loomed so large in her life, she transfers all the guilt of their tumultuous and violent relationship to herself.

Rebecca continued to stare at her husband's lifeless body...she found her thoughts hurtling forward as each of her justifications for coming home toppled to expose the subterfuge of her existence. Only now that Pasion lay dead did she recognize that he alone had been the reason for her return...that she depended on his abuse to be the ongoing and conspicuous reason for her despair...

...In his blood-encrusted eyes she saw proof of his vulnerability. In his feather-stuffed, gaping mouth she found evidence of the love he must have borne for her... (303-304)

Thinking that she can resolve the problems of her family herself, Aurelia still fails to see the danger Marina poses. The final event that shakes the family to its core is when Marina, off her medication, attacks Iliana. Having become obsessed that Iliana is both evil and in actuality a man, Marina attempts to locate the source of her sex.

Until this time, Aurelia had averted her gaze, denying to herself the power within, but now having accepted that this power is a part of her, Aurelia is finally able to see. Like Iliana, Aurelia realizes that home is not a physical location but a part of our memories and self. After finally accepting herself, Aurelia is able to allow herself the creation of home.

The events in the novel upon which Iliana and Aurelia enact their gaze result in both discovering truths of family and self and through these both emerge stronger, ready to face their present and future. Iliana had denied or consciously forgotten the stories of hardship that had been lived by her and her family but was faced with these memories as she encountered various geographies of the city. She needed these visions and memories to accept the fact that her parents were simply two people who had tried their best within the realm of possibility allotted them by their specific circumstances to raise their children and provide them with as much happiness as they could. When she realizes this, she can finally accept the incorporation of these memories to her identity and is able to move forward.

Although Iliana knew that she still had to leave, she did not pull away. Like her mother's and father's too, her soul had transformed into a complex and resilient thing able to accommodate the best and worst. Everything she had experienced; everything she continued to feel for those whose lives would be inextricably bound with hers; everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were herself. All of them were home. (324)

She no longer needs to find a place to call home for she realizes she carries it with her in her memories—she is her own home. Aurelia too had to accept her past to find the strength necessary to move onwards and heal the wounds of her family.

This novel touts the importance of history on both the present and future, following the trend of many Dominican American writers who work to break the seal of silence on the past as well as the way in which the past continues to shape the present. As the characters work to discover themselves, using the gaze to shatter silence we can glean much about the process of identity formation and the experiences of a Dominican family in NY. What comes across as part of the identity of the *dominicanidad* conceived of by the characters and perhaps the author is a strength, resilience of will even in the most extreme and dire circumstances, patience, the powers of family bonds and the importance of accepting all that the past holds for you to be stronger. It is the acknowledgment of all the world has to offer, the good and the bad, and using this knowledge and those memories of family that allows one to survive the sometimes harsh realities of existence. We carry these lessons with us every day. Home is not always a place but the well in which these memories blend, ultimately informing who we are. The negotiation of past and memories/constructions of Dominican Republic for the present was apparent through much of this story as ultimately forming the new identities of Iliana and Aurelia. It is especially fascinating because identity is constantly shifting, building upon the earlier blocks and so to see the process by which it continues molding itself is important.

The characters in both novels are often exposed, not just emotionally but physically, exploitatively exposed. In *Geographies of Home*, we see individuals exposing themselves, making themselves vulnerable to the gaze of others while at times perpetrating the gaze themselves. In *Song of the Water Saints*, the narrative begins with the exploitation of Graciela and her boyfriend Silvio by the *yanqui*, Peter, who photographs them in lurid sexual positions. Here, the perpetrator of the gaze is an unfamiliar, a foreigner, a representation of the American force in the country. One might consider him a representation of the influence America had and

continues to have in the Dominican Republic. This *yanqui* not only exposed such an intimate act, forever ensuring their images be visible to any spectator, but exploited their need for money as he used this need to elicit access to this photographic session. As such, the idea of gaze and its relation to power are important concepts to explore.

A character who has not grounded herself in family history and rebuffs the wisdom of elders, the reader often finds Graciela as the powerless object of another's gaze. The fact that the story begins with Graciela and Silvio sharing an intimate moment, followed by the exploiting of this moment by a *yanqui* man is an important one. The *yanqui* man offers the couple money in exchange for permission to photograph them. From the start of their interactions, the *yanqui* man is keen on exhibiting his power over them, from the thrusting and pulling away of money to his literal continuous gaze of the two:

Peter. Silvio. Graciela. They were all happy to meet each other. The man leaned against the seawall and pulled out a wad of pesos from a pocket in his outer jacket. His eyes never left Graciela and Silvio...

Graciela reached for the pesos before Silvio did; after all, Peter West had thrust them in her direction when he finished his convoluted explanations. But he quickly pulled the pesos away, leaving Graciela's fingers splayed open. With the promise of pesos, Graciela and Silvio found themselves in the Galician vendor's warehouse, where Peter West had staged many ribald acts among its stacks of rice...

Graciela's whisper rippled through the warehouse when the fantasy soured. The pink hand tugged at her skirt and pointed briskly to Silvio's pants. They turned to each other as the same hand dangled pesos before them...

Graciela's shoulders dropped. She unlaced her hair and folded her blouse and skirt. In turn, Silvio unbuttoned his mandarin shirt and untied the rope at his waist. Graciela folded her clothes along with his over a pile of cornhusks. In the dampness, they shivered while West kneaded their bodies as if molding stubborn clay.

...[T]hey were twisted about on a hard couch that stank of old rags. Then Graciela and Silvio watched in complicit silence as West approached the couch and knelt in front of them.

...One by one, West's fingers wrapped around Silvio's growing penis. He wedged the thumb of his other hand into the humid mound between Graciela's thighs. Neither moved while they watched his forehead glitter. And just as they could hear each other's own sucks of breath, they felt piercing slaps on their chins. West ran to the camera to capture the fire in their faces.

As promised, the *yanqui*-man tossed Silvio a flurry of pesos. (9-11)

Throughout, the *yanqui* conveyed his perception of the two, not as people, but as objects by which he can create some form of art to satisfy his own interests. In capturing this image, the *yanqui* uses the camera to appropriate a moment, an intimacy that belonged to Graciela and Silvio. Adequately entitled "Intruder", this chapter thusly introduces the reader to the first instance in which Graciela's person, privacy, identity is intruded upon, but it also simultaneously points to the power status of the country which at the start of the novel is still under American control. Unable perhaps to truly own a country or a people, the *yanqui* undertakes to possess it in the nearest manner possible; if the gaze itself is representative of power, how much more so is a photograph, an immortalized travel image of a moment in which one can forever gaze upon

another. Ultimately, the perpetrator of the gaze can display and share this symbol of power over the two as he sees fits, often leaving the gazed unable to opine.

Beth Newman similarly describes the connection between gaze and power in her analysis of *Wuthering Heights*. Throughout, Newman argues that Lockwood's interest in listening to the story of the Catherine's stems from his unfulfilled desire to own Catherine, the younger; he is unable to do so otherwise with his gaze due to Catherine's ability to look back, "Lockwood cannot enjoy looking once his look is detected... [she who] looks a return... threatens to immobilize him, to deprive him of his self-command, to render him stock still—practically to paralyze him" (1030). Interestingly, both Newman and Koskela suggest an ability to return the gaze, to defy being known without similarly knowing the other. It is in fact this ability to return the gaze which inscribes fear in the heart of man. Newman notes Freud's analysis of the myth of Medusa which suggests the fear in men is due to the fact that it "evokes the terror of castration in the male spectator..." (1030), Newman continues to pursue the fear of the Medusa:

Perhaps the sight that makes the Medusa threatening to the male spectator may be understood as the sight of someone else's look—the knowledge that the other sees and therefore resists being reduced to an appropriate object. That is Medusa defies the male gaze as Western culture has constructed it: as the privilege of a male subject, a means of relegating women (or "Woman") to the status of object (of representation, discourse, desire, etc.). Such defiance is surely unsettling, disturbing the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchical relations by which he asserts his dominance...

[Whereas the return look inspires fear] undisturbed looking returns the subject to the sense of completeness associated with the scopophile pleasures of the mirror

stage...returning look “from the place of the other” disrupts that sense of wholeness.

(1031)

The *yanqui* reduces the potential of power of the look back of both Silvio and Graciela by taking control of their representation; his photographing of them is his attempt to own their moment, to own them without fear of the return look; though they watch him as he fumbles around with the scene, they do so complicitly, thus not defying his power. If the power of the gaze stems from the ability to know, the fear of the return look is the fear of being known by the other, of having one’s identity appropriated.

Within the first 100 pages, Graciela’s status as a powerless object in relations to men especially seems solidified. Firstly, her encounter with the *yanqui* man which is followed years later by her meeting with the German-Frenchman Eli. Before they have exchanged any words, Eli has already begun fantasizing about Graciela. “He could tell from the cuticles on her small brown fingers that she was a girl of dark meats. Purplish nipples, perhaps. He closed his eyes and saw the gray creases where ass meets thighs. Eli could feel himself growing hard in the heat. Wanted to drive his hardness into velvet blackness” (Rosario 67). In his fantasizing, Graciela loses her position as a subject or self, has become an object solely for the fulfilling of Eli’s desires. Not only does he objectify her body, he exoticizes her blackness: “By rubbing her flesh with dry lavender or fresh thyme or a concentrate of the two after a salt bath, he believed the black woman acquired an extremely exotic perfume, quite apart from the insipidness of the white woman” (68). Graciela’s body, really the body of any woman, is described as one would describe food, merely a part of a recipe for the express purpose of satisfying the preparer. It is interesting to note that even here, there is a hint of Graciela’s own power to dissolve this man’s fantasies:

“Eli opened his eyes to find that the girl’s face was stronger than he had expected from her small brown hands” (68).

As an object of Eli’s desire, Graciela’s body is a passive object. Once they have interacted, Graciela remains passive. “Not much later, Eli entered without knocking...He was out of his jacket and wore only pants. A new authority rang in his voice, as if he were lounging in his own home.--Sit up, he said” (78). Eli proceeds to season Graciela, making her body more fitting to his taste. At her questioning the reason for the herbs, Eli responds merely “Seasoning for my meal” (78). At no point before the act does Graciela remove herself from passivity. Only during does she finally attempt to at least “own some of the pleasure” by grinding but Eli effectively manages to cease her movement and hence her pleasure (79).

Though so much of Graciela’s journey seems tinged with powerlessness or passivity, there are moments that suggest the potential for her to regain and assert power. Never content at home, Graciela seems always in search of and longing for an elusive something; her dissatisfaction at her lack of freedom stems from her inability to know and express herself. While Casimiro is working on reflectors for the donkeys made of glass, Graciela comes up with a more interesting and perhaps telling use for the pieces of glass:

The mirror in their narrow bedroom was mottled with black stains through which she guessed at her appearance. What she could make out of herself was elongated in several places. Graciela wanted to take Casimiro’s pieces of glass for herself and glue them to the bottom of her bed pot to be able to see what all the fuss was about down there. Or she could cut it into small pieces to wear around her neck so people would see themselves as they spoke to her, and act as they would toward their own reflections. (55)

Graciela is thwarted at first with the opaqueness of the mirror that adorns hers and Casimiro's narrow bedroom, unable to know herself while at their home and so she concocts a different use for the glasses that would enable her to see and know herself. The opaqueness of the mirror reflects the opaqueness of knowing herself—she is unable to verbalize or find that which her soul longed for; though she is unable to know herself, it is apparent and represented in her imaginative repurposing of the glass that shows she longs to remedy that fact. Interestingly, it is that part of her that defines her as female which she desires to gaze upon, that part which men find desirable and have exploited. In admitting her curiosity about herself, and acknowledging that men have been interested in that particular part of her, Graciela is attempting to better understand her person. Another thought comes to her, that of using the mirrors as a way to force others to know themselves, and more to the point, both see how they act when with others and perhaps convey how they might otherwise act if conscious of only their reflections. The necklace would encourage self-policing, as people would be made aware of how they interact and portray themselves to others. More than being the bearer of self-awareness, Graciela thinks of a manner in which she can control this self-awareness as the self-discovery would be possible when Graciela is present with her glass necklace. This moment could also speak to the general lack of self-awareness preached by her neighbors. Whether unable or perhaps unwilling to go through with this exhibition of gaze through glass, Graciela lets the idea return to the recesses of her mind.

After escaping the brothel to which Eli had brought her, Graciela takes a job in Santiago as a maid to the married couple Ana and Humberto and here again, Graciela attempts to exert power through the act of the gaze. It is in her journey home from Santiago that Graciela is offered a job as a house maid. During her time there, she is met with many a wondrous luxurious

item, some of which she packs away in her hatbox as souvenirs. One such item is a photo of Ana and Humberto. When she first sees the photograph, she experiences a sickening as she remembers a photograph taken of her a few years past, in a vulnerable position she allowed herself to be in. This photograph of Ana and Humberto is vastly different from the one taken of Graciela and Silvio, yet it does expose some vulnerability, “[Humberto] looked defiantly at Graciela, half his face covered in shadow; Ana directed her gaze downward” (92). While Humberto’s image in the photograph attempts to defy the gaze of the viewer, Ana subjugates herself, allowing the gaze of the other to be undisturbed. Of the hatbox full of items that Graciela steals, this photograph symbolizes her attempt to take part in the act of gazing, rather than just merely playing the object of it.

Seemingly, Graciela does finally seem to gain a powerful gaze only after she loses the ability to see. After her time spent at a convent where she looked for relief from syphilis, Graciela returns to her daughter Mercedes, blind and yet able to see more clearly. It is interesting to note that Graciela comes across two statues of la Virgen de Altagracia, both of which were faceless. First at the inn where she spent some time with Eli: “In addition to a washbasin and bar of soap, there was a small statue of La Virgen de Altagracia on top of the nightstand. The face once delicately detailed, was chipped. She was a faceless woman with her arms spread” (75). She again sees the statue at the convent on page 149. Both incidents are described verbatim suggesting the importance and connection of the incidents. In both locations, Graciela looks for freedom or release from some aspect of her life; in the second incident Graciela is suffering from syphilis which contracted during the first incident. Perhaps these passages seventy pages apart use the same language to describe the statue of La Virgen as they connote posts in Graciela’s journey where she, symbolically becomes like the statue: unable to see yet knowing, “The

blinder she became, she believed, the easier it was for her to see” (171). Graciela is able to prophesy a number of events from familial to national:

And she would speak continuously of a military man who was rising to power, a demon among them who would claim the cloak of God and feed the nation to the wolves...

She had a premonition of a granddaughter unraveling hummingbirds on a curtain, feet on a bed. Graciela wondered why Mercedes would give this crucifix away to such an ungrateful child. Child who would bid no blessings in the morning. A girl who would not wash her bloomers after each bath, who would go to school but would not know how to write a simple letter. (171-172)

Graciela’s newfound ability to see not only lets her foretell the future rise of Trujillo, but connects her to Leila, her great-granddaughter.

Leila’s self-imposed disconnect from family history ultimately results in her repeating Graciela’s story. Just as Eli had gazed upon Graciela hungrily as though she were food, so too does Miguel view Leila as something to satiate his appetite. This is clear as Leila looks into his eyes at the club: “He had glassy eyes in which Leila, with tingling in her cheeks, saw herself reflected as a baked chicken. And she laughed because his eyes twinkled like diamonds, really” (229). Though noting that she appears to him as food, she is not dissuaded from continuing their flirtations. Perhaps she believes she holds some power over him or perhaps, as his eyes resembled diamonds, he represents a more dazzling life for Leila.

As the moment arrives to consummate their rendezvous, his craving for her is palpable. Leila asks that Miguel engage with her in a way that would ensure pleasure or at least comfort for her but her plea does not move him. “Smiling, Leila kissed him, but he turned her on her stomach and pulled off her shoes...—Migo, please kiss me at least, Leila whimpered into faded

flowers” (232). Just as the flowers of the wallpaper are faded, so too has Leila’s expectations of this moment. Unable to dissuade Miguel from this maltreatment, Leila does what she can to distance herself from the experience:

A fog. Not tears. She would not cry. Instead, her legs widened and Leila dug her nails into Miguel’s back. When he pushed past her tightness, Leila felt herself turn to rubber. The free gift remained untouched on the nightstand, while the headboard banged into a groove that had worn through the sunflower wallpaper. Leila saw them. She witnessed the man on top of the girl, her legs twisted under him, her brand-new breasts crushed. She winced with the digging of his feet into the mattress at each thrust...the shock in her own eyes, then her face extinguished. (233)

She bears witness to the shock, disillusionment, and suffering as she realizes her own powerlessness. That her face disappears from her view is telling in that she is at this moment seemingly losing herself. After a second instance, Leila walks to the bathroom where she begins to clean herself and expel the poison she feels within. When she looks into the broken mirror, she sees a shattered, disheveled reflection:

In the cracked bathroom mirror, the fluorescent light revealed a splintered face with green around the eyes and purple blotches on the neck. The hair was yarn...She wondered if Mercedes and Andres’ spirits were watching as their bodies lay asleep....It was then that Leila really began to cry. (234)

The broken mirror and reflection are suggestive of Leila’s current state; she feels broken, distanced from herself, incomplete. In this mirror she is unable to see her complete self as she is not whole. This is reminiscent of Graciela’s earlier attempt to view herself in the opaque mirror but as she too did not know herself, she was unable to view a clear image. At earlier points in the

novel, as Leila gazes on pictures of herself, she notes that there is something missing or unfamiliar. “When she saw herself in pictures, it was as if she were looking at someone else, not the person she remembers being. . . Her fingers flipped through the twelve slices of her life. Back then, her stronger sense of self had allowed her to look straight into the camera” (211-212). At this point in her life, Leila no longer feels a strong sense of identity and as she looks upon “[h]er passport picture [she sees] an incomplete smile, as if the camera had sucked up its other half” (216). After looking on her reflection in the mirror, Leila reflects on her family, and only then does she allow herself to express the heartbreak she endured.

After the trauma she experienced with Miguel, Leila spends a week at a friend’s before returning to her home. On the train ride, she looks upon the nothingness outside the window and is for a second time visited by her great-grandmother.

The Feeling started up again. She smiled. It had been a while since she’d had it. The familiar flutter center-left of her chest got warmer. . .

*Waited on a long line to get born. Still, life dealt me a shit deal. Don’t listen to whoever invents magics about me. Always tried to live what I wanted. Never pretended to be a good woman. Never tried to be a bad one. Just lived what I wanted. That’s all my mystery. Forget dirty tongues. They’re next door, in the soup, even in your own head. Some weak soul always trying to slip their tongue inside your mouth, clean as a baby’s pit. You, listen. My life was more salt than goat. Lived between memory and wishes...but [UP?] how much can a foot do inside a tight shoe? Make something better of it than me.*

Leila missed Mercedes and Andres, Ismael, and Amalfi, and even the great-grandmother she’s never met. She unpinned Mama Graciela’s amber crucifix from her

bustier and put it in her mouth and was overcome with a desire to love them, to make their lives happy before they all turned to leathern, then ash underground. (242)

Leila seems finally able to listen to the words of her deceased relative and is now open to loving her family. She has changed her demeanor and is has decided to appreciate her elders before they too leave this world. Earlier, as Leila and Mercedes study the crucifix, which once belonged to Graciela, it is described as “the tiny window” (209) and it is this crucifix which Leila put in her mouth. In doing so, Leila attempts to reach back through her family line to love and learn from her history.

## Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

What exactly do these narratives indicate in terms of identity? How do they express *dominicanidad*? What impressions do we gather from these on the strength of culture and how it encapsulates the experiences of immigration? These New York Dominican-Americans in the novels seem destined to lead desolate lives; family dissolution with unimaginable horrors occurring within the home and an inability to protect our own—these abound in the lives of the protagonists’ families. Only dangers await them in the city. Yet one cannot limit Dominican identity as encompassing only such experiences. My own experiences reflect a more positive light on family and thusly positively influence my *dominicanidad*. I have come to understand that while identity can and does shift, mine is shaped by my family’s pursuit in education, instilling of family history and pride. Though I was born and raised in the US, Dominican Republic and its beloved inhabitants were never far from my consciousness. My annual visits to the family in my youth allowed for the bonds that were created in the stories shared over dinner to be forever cemented in my heart and mind; it is my relationship to family that influences my relationship to *dominicanidad*. These initial stories fashioned a bridge between Clifton, NJ and

Salcedo, Conuco, Dominican Republic that time and space would never sever. What does it mean to me to be Dominican? It is partially listening to Juan Luis Guerra (to whose “*Si tu no bailas conmigo*” my husband and I danced as our first song as a married couple), consuming *platanos* in various forms of dishes (I prefer *fritos* or *maduros* but will devour them in nearly any style); but more importantly it is spending the summer with my family, swatting at the mosquitoes while sitting in *la galeria*, reading books that I had yearned to immerse myself in but lacked the time during the school year; always being served lunch at noon, despite the fact that I awoke and had breakfast at half past eleven; yelling out “*se fue la luz*” and eagerly awaiting *que prendan la planta*; quenching my thirst worsened by the summer heat of a Caribbean island with the fresh juices made daily by Juana; waiting for the milk that has been specifically picked up from the farm because I cannot stand the taste of the Rica milk that everyone else gladly drinks and adding cocoa mix that originated from the land of my family. There is something in knowing, when I visit there, that not only has there been this generation of my family, but that numerous generations before them, before us, lived on that land, lived and helped found the community of Conuco. There is a history, a living history through my extended family, which permeates the air in unison with the smell of the cacao plants. It is this sense of familial history that seems so absent in the novels, the connection to that history to the younger generation. The characters learn by the end of their journeys that this familial past, knowing it, understanding it, allows for a more complete picture of the self. It certainly has shaped my understanding of who I am. Aurelia finds that by not telling her children of their familial history, they knew not the strength lying within; Leila’s refusal to hear the stories that Mercedes tries to impress upon her, leads her to start upon the same path as we initially find her great grandmother on in chapter one.

Despite the rather bleak circumstances near the end in both, there is a hint of hope in each of future strength once the protagonists allow familial knowledge in.

The importance of the past as conveyed in these texts, especially family past, perhaps stems from the acknowledgment of loss and realization of the hurt ignoring history ensures. Both novels focus on family history and the trauma resulting from its silencing, but there are hints, especially more so in Rosario's work of a way to read this outside the scope of the biological family, to the national family. Through the policy of *borrón y cuenta nueva* followed by the refusal to withhold a truth and reconciliation commission, the truth of the Trujillo dictatorship and subsequent authoritarian regime of Balaguer were silenced, ignored, but the trauma persisted. That these writers are able to create these stories outside the boundaries of the identity of either/or Dominican and American, perhaps allows them to tell of the intersections of history. The United States has greatly influenced the shaping of the Dominican Republic especially in the recent past though it is not taught in most history courses. The US invaded the Dominican Republic multiple times, including in 1916 where they remained for eight years during which time Trujillo was trained, and later in 1965 in their efforts to quell the public's rising against Balaguer's US backed usurpation of Bosch's presidency. The US supported Trujillo's dictatorship for three decades as way of ensuring a base from which the US could fight communism in the Americas. The role of the US and the other self-designated first world powers, especially IMF and the World Bank, in the economic crisis in Latin America known as the Debt Crisis, cannot be downplayed as it continues to affect the ability of these countries to improve their circumstances. Like Graciela and Leila, who were viewed as objects for the lustful men in their lives, the Dominican Republic has been viewed and used as a means to an end, as the "playground of the Caribbean" for the world powers (Adams 40). It is by studying and

“[listening] to their [his]stories, the ones which they lived and the ones they told” that one can meet “the central challenge for our understanding of contemporary Latin America and the United States” (Hoffung-Garskof 247). Much as Iliana does by the end of *Geographies of Home*, by acknowledging and recognizing the past one is “[aided]... in [the] passage through the world. [We can] leave no memories behind” (324). By gazing through our histories and understanding the roles played and responsibilities of our national families, perhaps the trauma of history (colonialism, slavery, American imperialism), can begin toward the path of healing.

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