(IN)VISIBILITY, TRAUMA, AND MEMORY IN THE BLACK HISPANIC EXPERIENCE: BLACK FEMALE BODIES IN LOIDA MARITZA PÉREZ'S *GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME*

Laura Barrio-Vilar

Resumen

En este artículo, la autora sostiene que Loida Maritza Pérez revela cómo los problemas de las mujeres afrodominicanas se agravan en la diáspora, al resaltar la invisibilidad, ambigüedad y vulnerabilidad de los cuerpos de sus personajes. El cuerpo se convierte en una metáfora recurrente a lo largo de la novela, en un mapa geográfico en el que Pérez imprime la huella que la violencia deja en las inmigrantes afrolatinas. Puede que la familia protagonista haya escapado de la violencia y las dificultades económicas características del régimen de Trujillo. Sin embargo, su nuevo hogar en la ciudad de Nueva York no les proporciona el ambiente seguro y lujoso con el que han soñado. La violencia continúa esparciéndose en las vidas de los personajes, revelando los vestigios del trauma y la necesidad de reconciliar el presente con el pasado.

Palabras clave: inmigración, afrolatinas, cuerpos, violencia, diáspora

Abstract

In this essay, the author argues that Loida Maritza Pérez uncovers how Afro-Dominican women's struggles become aggravated in the diaspora, by drawing attention on the invisibility, ambiguity, and vulnerability of the main characters' bodies. The body becomes a recurrent metaphor throughout the novel, a geographical map on which Pérez delineates the imprint that violence leaves on these Afro-Latina immigrants. The family may have escaped the violence and economic difficulties prevalent in Trujillo's regime. However, their new home in New York City does not provide them with the safe and luxurious environment they have dreamed of. Violence continues to bleed into the characters' lives, exposing the lingering consequences of trauma and need to reconcile the present with the past.

Keywords: migration, Afro-Latinas, bodies, violence, diaspora

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Throughout the twentieth century, a significant number of Afro-Latinos have migrated from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic to the United States, due to the oppressive economic and political conditions in their home countries.[1] According to Jorge Duany, "each migrant community from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean emerged at a different juncture. U.S. immigration statistics suggest several waves throughout the twentieth century, successively drawing on various countries."[2] In this essay, I will focus only on a literary approach to the experience of Afro-Dominican immigrants in the late twentieth century, a major topic explored in Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*.[3] Specifically, I will explore the connections between violence and trauma in Afro-Domini-

[1] Because racial categories are different in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and in the United States, there is no accurate record of how many Afro-Cubans, Afro-Dominicans, and Afro-Puerto Ricans have migrated to the United States. See Jorge Duany, "Migration from the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean", in *In Motion: The African-American Migrant Experience*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 2005, p.1, [http://www.inmotionaame.org/texts/viewer.cfm?id=10_000BT&page=1], accessed March 20, 2009.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[3] Loida Maritza Pérez, *Geographies of Home*. New York, Viking, 1999.

can women's lives, which result from the individual and social policing of gender roles and class hierarchies.

Dominican immigration has consistently increased since the 1960s. Dominicans started migrating to the United States in large numbers soon after Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's assassination in 1961.[4] The socioeconomic and political turmoil resulting from the coup d'état against President Juan Bosch in 1963, as well as the civil war and U.S. military occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965, intensified the flow of immigrants, who also benefited from the Hart-Celler Immigration Reform Act.[5] Because of the 1980s economic crisis and austerity programs in the Dominican Republic, the number of immigrants increased exponentially until the 1990s, which helped the consolidation of a significant Dominican community in the United States. Dominicans of all classes and racial backgrounds sought economic relief in the United States.[6] As Duany points out, "by the 1980s, Dominicans had become one of the fastest growing segments of the foreign-born population in the United States. In the 1990s, the Dominican flow continued unabated, while the Cuban and Puerto Rican flows decreased temporarily."[7] In fact, Dominicans and Salvadorans are the largest growing groups among the diverse Hispanic population residing in the United States today.[8]

[4] Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's dictatorial regime (1930-1961) was the bloodiest in the history of the Dominican Republic. Constantly terrorized by *El Jefe*'s military police, Dominicans were deprived of political and civil liberties, while the dictator and his allies benefited from his economic and political corruption. Trujillo's strong anti-Haitian sentiment led to the massacre of an estimated 30,000 Hatians in 1937.

[5] The U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the "national origins" restrictions and opened the doors to a new wave of immigrants, mostly female and from developing nations, such as those in the Caribbean.

[6] Duany, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Lucía M. Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2006, pp. 1-2, 93.

[7] Duany, *op. cit.*, p. 3. "By 1990, more than 25 percent of the Dominicans in New York City said they were black, while 24 percent considered themselves white and 50 percent described their race as 'other.'" Duany, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[8] Duany, *op. cit.*, p. 4; John R. Logan and Wenquan Zhang, "Cubans and Dominicans: Is There a Latino Experience in the United States?", in Ramón Grosfoguel, Margarita Cervantes-Rodríguez, and Eric Mielants (eds.), *Carib-*

In *Geographies of Home*, Pérez narrates the story of an Afro-Dominican family that migrates to the United States due to the economic hardships and political persecution its members suffered in their home country during the Trujillo dictatorship. Although the traumatic consequences of exile affect all the family members (both parents, their fourteen children, and their grandchildren), my analysis will focus on two of the main female characters: Iliana, a nineteen-year-old college student who struggles to find a place she can call home and to redefine her family responsibilities; and Marina, Iliana's bipolar and schizophrenic sister, who constantly relives her experience and memories of rape and becomes a threat to herself and others. Pérez's characters deal with the ramifications of being Black, Hispanic, and women in a culture that, as immigrants, they cannot call their own and that does not deem their bodies and experiences as either possible or worth considering. Victims of sexual predators, domestic violence, and their own personal struggles regarding gender roles, the protagonists find themselves imprisoned by their bodies, over which they have no physical, mental, or even legal control.

By drawing attention toward the invisibility, ambiguity, and vulnerability of the main characters' bodies, Pérez unveils how Afro-Dominican women's struggles become aggravated in the diaspora. The body becomes a recurrent metaphor throughout the novel, a geographical map on which Pérez delineates the imprint that violence leaves on these Afro-Latina immigrants. The family may have escaped the violence and economic difficulties prevalent in Trujillo's regime. However, their new home in New York City does not provide them with the safe and luxurious environment they have dreamed of. Violence continues to permeate the characters' lives, exposing the lingering consequences of trauma and need to reconcile the present with the past.

Although the novel includes elements characteristic of migration literature, I am especially interested in highlighting the text as an example of trauma literature. The trauma

bean Migrations to Western Europe and the United States: Essays on Incorporation, Identity, and Citizenship. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2009, p. 193.

novel has become increasingly popular in the last three decades, mostly as a result of the most recent clinical studies of post-traumatic stress disorder. As Roger Luckhurst explains in *The Trauma Question*, not only do these narratives probe the long-term psychological effects of trauma on individuals and collective groups, but they also shed light on the interconnection of "recovered memory, the politics of survival, or competing kinds of public memorialization of past violence."[9] Given the history of violence in the Dominican Republic, which the characters in *Geographies of Home* attempt to forget, Pérez suitably chooses the style of trauma literature to explore how individuals, along with social and political structures, perpetuate violence in the Caribbean diaspora.

Iliana's Transgressive Body

Iliana, the main protagonist, disappoints her family when she refuses to fulfill the traditional female role determined by the patriarchal culture to which she belongs. Instead of staying at home taking care of her family or getting married, she decides to become independent. Her mental anguish, which stems from her search for a collective and individual cultural past that she can later reconcile with her present, becomes aggravated by her problems with body image. Occasionally taken for a drag queen, Iliana tries to adopt a more feminized image that only leads to male harassment. Furthermore, Marina, Iliana's sister, becomes obsessed with Iliana's masculine looks, and convinced that her sister is a man, she rapes Iliana in an attempt to find her masculine genitalia. Iliana's relationship with her body thus results in both physical and geographical displacement, since she eventually decides to leave her parents' house.

From the very beginning, Pérez makes it clear to her readers that the story they are about to read is not only about a Dominican family, but about an Afro-Dominican family. The novel opens with Iliana returning to her dorm room, where somebody has written the slur "NIGGER" on her message

[9] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*. New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 87.

board.[10] Iliana's counselors try to discourage her from applying to college because "she was not smart enough" and they predict she will encounter racism and prejudice upstate, where she decides to go to school.[11] Unfortunately, her counselors are right about the hostile atmosphere in which Iliana will live. Not only does she have to deal with attacks because of her race, but her gender also makes her prone to harassment. During her first semester Iliana is stalked by a student, who also tries to rape her.[12] Furthermore, Iliana's experience as a Black Latina is silenced by the college curriculum, where "courses disclaimed life as she had known it, making her feel invisible."[13] Her gender, race, class, and immigrant status are either ignored or misrepresented: "When classmates had presumed to know the inner workings of those of her race and class –inferring their inherent laziness, lack of motivation, welfare dependency, and intellectual deficiency– she had stopped up her ears and gradually trained her eyes not to see."[14] The increasing harassment and isolation she suffers in college, along with her sense of responsibility toward her family, eventually lead Iliana to quit college and return home, in search of a place where she can feel she belongs.

Iliana's intersecting identity categories as an immigrant Afro-Latina often become a source of contention within her community. Growing up in Brooklyn, Iliana

> ... had yearned to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she could be easily identified as belonging to either group. She would have traded her soul to have the long, straight hair and olive skin of her Spanish-speaking friends or to wear her hair in cornrows and have no trace of a Spanish accent... She used to hate the question "Where you from?" because few of her classmates knew of the Dominican Republic and several of her black friends assumed that she claimed to be a Hispanic in order to put on airs.

[10] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

> "What you talking about, girl?" they'd ask. "We don't care where you come from! You be black just like us!"
> "Nah, you speak Spanish. You one of us", her Puerto Rican friends would say.
> … With her skin color identifying her as a member of one group and her accent and immigrant status placing her in another, she had fit comfortably in neither and even less in the circles she had found herself in when she finally went away to school.[15]

Iliana's body is racially marked as Black in the United States (where the one-drop rule still determines a person's race), but her national origin and bilingualism also place her in the Hispanic category. In order to be accepted as part of mainstream America and avoid being dismissed as an immigrant outsider, she is forced to reevaluate her identity and emphasize her race over any other defining aspect. Her friends and acquaintances in the United States see Black and Hispanic as mutually exclusive categories of race. Paradoxically, although Blacks and *mulatos* constitute approximately 90 percent of the Dominican population, Silvio Torres-Saillant remarks that "Afro-Dominicans do not see blackness as the central component of their identity. They tend to privilege their nationality instead, which implies participation in a culture, a language community, and the sharing of a lived experience."[16] In the case of Iliana, instead of allowing her to define and belong to a category of her own, or to all of them for that matter, others force her to choose among the already-existing U.S. racial and ethnic categories, which often rely on binaries to essentialize the Afro-Latina experience.

Duany argues that "Hispanic Caribbean migration has contributed to the erosion of the traditional dichotomy between black and white people that has been prevalent in U.S. history and continues to be important today."[17] However, the changes to which he refers apply mostly to legal terminology,

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

[16] Silvio Torres-Saillant, "The Dominican Republic", in Minority Rights Group (ed.), *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*, London, Minority Rights Publications, 1995, p. 131.

[17] Duany, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

not so much to mainstream cultural discourses. When the U.S. Census Bureau began to require respondents to specify their race separately from their Hispanic origin since 1980, the majority chose "some other race" or "two or more races", with the highest percentage found among Dominicans.[18] The creation of new racial categories in government documents, however, does not minimize Iliana's sense of alienation. She is caught between various identity categories and forced to choose only one group to align herself with. Consequently, Iliana is prevented from finding a sense of belonging. Her body is constantly appropriated by others, and she never seems to fully control it.

Iliana's awkward relationship with her body manifests physically in very peculiar ways. She walks with a stride "that had caused her grief since childhood and that she had tried her damnedest to change since then."[19] Her looks and walk often lead others to believe she is a drag queen.[20] When she complains to her friend Ed about it, he confesses she has a "dramatic" Black-diva-style look and runway walk that she should be proud of.[21] Whereas Ed considers Iliana attractive by mainstream American standards, Iliana's siblings have the opposite opinion about her androgynous looks. Even one of her brothers comments, "'if you weren't my sister I wouldn't know if you were a man trying to look like a woman or a woman trying to look like a man.'"[22] Because her gender is perceived as ambiguous and different, Iliana is always the object of ridicule and criticism, underscoring the idea that those who fail to fit in clear categories are prone to vulnerability and punishment.

Iliana must learn to reconcile two different cultural standards of beauty, femininity, and national consciousness. According to American standards, Iliana's slim body is considered appealing, which facilitates her acceptance by main-

[18] These responses "rang[ed] from 11 percent among Cubans to almost 45 percent among Puerto Ricans and 67 percent among Dominicans." Duany, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

[19] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

stream America. The fact that she is getting a college education will also contribute to the process of assimilation into middle-class American standards. However, her physical appearance blurs too many of the boundaries of clearly defined and established categories. Her bilingual and bicultural nature also poses a problem. Her upbringing in the Dominican Republic has exposed her to nationality and race constructs different from those operating in the United States. According to Antonio Olliz Boyd's research, "black Dominicans do not see blackness as the central component of their identity, since this affirms their participation in a culture, a language community, and the sharing of a lived experience."[23] Now that Iliana lives in the United States, she has the opportunity to assimilate into American society by denying her Dominican background and aligning with African Americans. But she is unwilling to cut all ties with her Dominican culture, since that would imply erasing her entire childhood and adulthood as a member of a Dominican family and a Spanish-speaking immigrant community.

On the other hand, Iliana's racial identity and demeanor go against certain preconceived notions of Dominican beauty, womanhood, and national consciousness. Iliana's physical description suggests she possesses presumably undesirable characteristics: "Her hair, parted at the side and hanging limp, concealed the nut-brown forehead for which she was often taunted with the Dominican idiom 'Big forehead, big pussy.' ... Her lips, wide as Marina's but the length of Beatriz's, pouted so sullenly that despite the chiseled cheeks and a nose her sisters envied as 'white' she appeared the ugliest of the three."[24] Unlike the majority of the Dominican population, she does not fall into the categories of white, *india*, or *morena*. She is clearly black, a racial term that very few Dominicans choose due to its pejorative connotation, as Boyd illustrates through his analysis of the interconnections among race, phenotype,

[23] Antonio Olliz Boyd, "An Aesthetic Experience: The Reality of Phenotypes and Racial Awareness in Dominican Literature; Julia Alvarez and Loida Maritza Pérez", in *The Latin American Identity and the African Diaspora: Ethnogenesis in Context*, Amherst, N.Y., Cambria, 2010, p. 192.

[24] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

and national origin in Dominican culture and literature.[25] As opposed to her other siblings, whose phenotypical characteristics could allow them to "escape" the category of Dominican Black, Iliana's body does not match the official constructs of Dominican national identity. Neither does her independent, self-sufficient behavior. By choosing to move out of the house to go to college, Iliana is not conforming to traditional Dominican gender expectations, which determine that "respectable" women have to become wives and mothers in order to leave the nest. Thus, her family perceives her decision to pursue a higher education as a direct affront against both the family and their Dominican background. Whenever Iliana refers to what she has learned in college or offers a perspective uninformed by their religion, her parents and siblings resent her "airs" and accuse her of treason.[26]

Iliana is ultimately punished for her transgressions, especially by her sister Marina and her father. Pérez emphasizes the challenges of navigating two different cultural sets of gender roles and expectations in two key scenes in the novel. In both instances Iliana's body is the center of contention. Marina has noticed her sister's long limbs, big hands, and masculine demeanor. Since her bipolar and schizophrenic condition often leads her to exaggerate things and suffer from hallucinations, she concludes that Iliana might have internal male genitalia. Obsessed to find out the truth behind Iliana's ambiguous nature, she attacks her in the middle of the night and jams her fist into Iliana's vagina: "The world, as she [Iliana] had known it, crashed irrevocably around her head as her sister's hand turned into a fist. Her thoughts screeched mercifully to a halt as that fist crashed against her womb."[27] Iliana's screams wake up their younger brother Tico, who comes to their bedroom to help her.

When the attack is over, Iliana feels dismembered: "Iliana shut her eyes and did not move. She suspected that if she stirred her head would roll off her neck as it often had in dreams. She suspected that her limbs would forsake her body

[25] Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 160.
[26] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 287.

and drop lifelessly to the floor."[28] As soon as she finds enough strength to get up from her bed, she tries to convince Tico (and herself) that "'Nothing happened'" in order to keep her sanity and avoid conflict with her sister.[29] She tells herself that "[s]he was far more than the sum of her spilled blood and her flesh that had been pierced. She was the breaths seeping from her lips, the heart resounding in her chest, the anima enabling her to perceive. This was the litany that buoyed her thoughts. Bodies recovered. Wounds healed. Scars faded and left no mark."[30] Pérez's description of Iliana's rape draws attention to Iliana's body, the object of punishment from Marina's point of view. After helping her readers visualize Iliana's physical trauma, Pérez walks them through the typical stages that rape victims experience after the attack: disassociation from their body and denial. By personalizing the process, she turns a single private incident into a politicized question for public discussion.

A little after Tico leaves them alone, Marina attacks Iliana again. This time not only does Tico come to the rescue, but also their parents, who try to deny the severity of what they see. Aurelia, the mother, tries to justify Marina's actions and minimize the situation by blaming it all on her daughter's mental health. However, Iliana shows clear signs of resentment toward her sister after the second attack: "Her sister knew precisely what it was she'd done. She knew and was pleased that no one else would ever detect what it was she had destroyed. She knew and depended on shame to silence Iliana and efface whatever self she'd been."[31] Neither Iliana nor her family considers the possibility of reporting the rape or looking for help from experts. Papito, the head of the family and Aurelia's husband, does not even comprehend what happened. He thinks that Marina has physically assaulted her sister. Aurelia, on the other hand, realizes her daughter has been raped when she sees "Iliana's hand shielding her private parts" in her sleep.[32]

[28] *Ibid*., pp. 287-288.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 289.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 290.
[31] *Ibid*., p. 293.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 295.

The family's response to what is probably the most gruesome incident in the novel forces the reader to question the circumstances under which this family lives. Papito and Aurelia still hesitate over the possibility of having Marina institutionalized. They feel that doing so would mean admitting they have failed as parents and that their religion and love are not enough to help them in this situation. Furthermore, Papito is concerned about the public repercussions this decision could have for the family as members of the Seventh Day Adventist church they attend. Marina has already put them in a precarious situation once, when she had an "attack" in the middle of the service. Taking care of their children is fundamental to them, but so is avoiding public shame and humiliation. Furthermore, the language barrier poses a tremendous challenge for them, since only a few in the family can speak English. Even their acquaintances are mostly other Spanish speakers.

The limitations imposed by their lack of command of the English language and lack of social and economic resources isolate most of the family members from the English-speaking community, especially public and social organisms. Moreover, as far as family matters are concerned, they tend to be cautious and very private. Because Iliana's rape involves a member of the same family, all of them seem to believe that the State or its representative "public" agencies should not intervene in "private" family matters. Although by now the entire family has "green cards" and resides legally in the country, they do not seem to rely on or trust the State and its resources. After all, government officials have let them down before, at least in their home country. The family's working-class status and unfamiliarity with the culture and available resources also prevent them from receiving the help they need, which leaves Iliana in a precarious situation.

Although her family may consider her rape a private matter not to leave the confines of their home, Iliana tries to reach out to her friend Ed to tell him what has happened and process the severity of the event's consequences. When she finds that Ed is not at home, Iliana collapses at his doorstep and for the first time puts into words her experience: "'Last night I was a –attacked.'" Like many trauma survivors, Ilia-

na begins her recovery struggling to find the right words to describe and make sense of her rape: "Her brain tried to absorb the impact of that single word. Attacked. Was that what she'd endured? Was that the term for her pinned body, for the fist jammed in between her thighs, for the pain that ripped through to her very core? Could any of it be labeled such… ?"[33] She struggles to find words that capture her traumatic experience and the emotional and physical pain she has gone through. Revisiting the memory of the rape requires Iliana to focus on the connection between her body and psyche. Her body might remember the physical pain, but the mind cannot name, let alone understand, such a traumatic and unthinkable event. Jennifer Griffiths remarks that "the survivor relives the original experience through a body memory yet struggles to find words for an experience that exceeds representation. A kind of break between body and language occurs that… only a connection to another body can bridge."[34] The process of reconciling the incest with its psychological consequences is one that Pérez does not include in her novel. The author, nevertheless, has a chance to explore the disconnect between body and language through Marina's traumatic case, which I will address in the next section of this essay.

Iliana's struggle with finding words to articulate the violence she has experienced is not unique. No matter the language, English or Spanish, words can hardly encapsulate the psychological and physical experience of violence from the victim's point of view. As Elaine Scarry points out in *The Body in Pain*, language also poses a challenge for writers when they attempt to describe physical pain and trauma, especially if they want to avoid a voyeuristic representation of violence.[35] As a result, writers often resort to metaphors, comparisons, and other tropes. Referring to both physical and psychological responses, Pérez provides a vivid description of the sexual

[33] *Ibid*., p. 314.

[34] Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville, Va., University of Virginia Press, 2009, p. 1.

[35] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1985.

violence to which Iliana is subjected. Depicting the act itself does not pose much of a problem. Through the use of verbs and nouns that refer to concrete actions and body parts, readers can picture what Mariana does to Iliana. It is Iliana's physical pain and psychological response that Pérez has to find expression for. Thus, she relies on metaphors: "The world, as she had known it, crashed irrevocably around her head."[36] Even after the attack, Pérez continues her use of metaphorical language to highlight the connection between Iliana's broken, violated body and the psychological consequences of the rape: "She suspected that if she stirred her head would roll off her neck as it often had in dreams. She suspected that her limbs would forsake her body and drop lifelessly to the floor."[37] In order to overcome the challenge of verbalizing physical pain, Pérez resorts to reifying her character, who turns into a lifeless, unstable mannequin of sorts, about to be disassembled. If Iliana's body falls apart, the next logical step is to find the means to put it back together.

Pérez adds an extra layer of complexity to Iliana's traumatic experience by having a woman –Iliana's sister– inflicting sexual violence on another woman. The idea of incest is something that Iliana cannot comprehend, for it stands against everything she believes in: "Could her sister –her sister? Sister. That was the word that stuck in her craw, the word that prevented her from speaking to anyone about what had occurred."[38] For Iliana, family means home and safety. Being sexually assaulted by a close sibling with whom she shares a blood bond and a lifetime of experiences is unimaginable. Only when Iliana manages to create what Sonia C. Apgar calls "a coherent personal narrative that not only fits *with* the survivor's memories and perceptions, but also fits *into* the social constructions or cultural norms available to her" will she recover.[39] Trauma experts suggest developing and analyzing this

[36] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[39] Sonia C. Apgar, "Fighting Back on Paper and in Real Life: Sexual Abuse Narratives and the Creation of Safe Space", in Tomoko Kuribayashi and Julie Tharp (eds.), *Creating a Safe Space: Violence and Women's Writing*, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 1998, p. 48.

coherent personal narrative through writing. In *Geographies of Home*, however, Pérez chooses not to delve into the process of coming to terms with the traumatic experience of rape and its ramifications. Instead of writing about Iliana's journey toward recovery, Pérez draws attention to the circumstances that lead to the attack.

Pérez's critique of traditional gender values through Iliana's body continues three chapters later after the rape scene. The day after her rape, Iliana wanders the streets of New York, trying to figure out what to do. She is harassed by three men in the street, whose catcalling makes Iliana even more self-conscious about her body: "she could not help but recall her brothers' notion that a woman's walk conveyed her sexual status and availability. If she had been penetrated, and recently at that, her hips would thrust forward and sway as if unhinged. If she remained intact, she would walk as if protecting what she foolishly deemed a treasure."[40] Instead of blaming the men for their disrespectful and sexist behavior, Iliana focuses on the connection she has learned exists between her body and sexual availability: "Whorish. That was how Iliana's sisters habitually described her walk. Wanton and inviting, conveying that she wanted to be fucked."[41] Her response to the harassment reveals how deeply she has internalized the patriarchal definitions of femininity and sexuality: it is women who are responsible for how their bodies are read and treated by men. If a woman is sexually harassed, it is because she was looking for it.

When Iliana arrives home late at night, her father slaps her and calls her "hussy" and "whore", as a punishment for what he considers reckless behavior. Papito's main concern is protecting his daughters against sexual predators, who could ravish their vulnerable female bodies and ultimately dishonor not only his daughters but his family. In order to instill fear in them and ensure they remain within the boundaries of what he considers stable gender dynamics, Papito has raised all his children to follow traditional gender roles in Dominican culture. The girls, for example, are expected to do

[40] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 310.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 311.

household chores and help in the kitchen, while the men in the family play chess or watch TV. The girls are not allowed to go out unchaperoned, with the exception of Rebecca (the oldest sister) and Iliana (the youngest). Papito exercises his power as the patriarch of the family and uses strict guidelines for all his daughters, who have had to use all kinds of subterfuges to avoid their father's rage and now resent his abuse and tendency to teach through punishment.[42] As Lucía M. Suárez argues, Papito's "sexism, and the violence that is portrayed in *Geographies of Home*, responds to a long history of abuse, fear, and repression. Papito wants the best for his family, but he does not know how to make that happen, so he repeats familiar patterns –patterns of violence."[43] The novel therefore exposes how violence permeates the characters' lives both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States. Rather than escaping the legacy of violence that surrounded them in their homeland, Pérez's characters unconsciously replicate it in their new home. The interconnection between political and personal processes thus intensifies the effects of trauma in the family.

Iliana is, nevertheless, determined not to submit to her father's accusations, and reclaims the right to her body and to do as she pleases with it: "*I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone. You will not make me recoil from it or renounce my life as I thought I would do. I will survive all this.*"[44] As she defiantly stands up in front of her father, Iliana ponders how "[t]he man standing before her was as much of a brute and stranger as the man who had followed her earlier that day."[45] Iliana considers her father's values and attitude part of a larger pattern where violence and misogyny conflate. Papito tries to explain his use of physical punishment on his children by revisiting his memory of three-year-old Iliana carelessly playing next to a river in the Dominican Republic. Afraid for her safety, Papito beats her: "I had to teach you a lesson so that you'd learn to be afraid. Without

[42] Pérez, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-270.
[43] Suárez, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
[44] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 316; italics in original.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 217.

fear, anything could've happened to you. It was my responsibility to teach you about danger and keep you safe."[46] As well intentioned as her father's teachings may have been, Iliana still rejects the contradiction of resorting to violence at home, when so much violence exists in their public surroundings.

Eventually Iliana realizes that she is the one to shape her life, even if it is connected to her family: "her soul had transformed into a complex and resilient thing able to accommodate the best and the worst. Everything she had experienced; …everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home."[47] Instead of escaping her reality, Iliana resolves to fight and overcome the traumatic experience she has endured. The ending of the novel suggests she will always be connected to her family, although she decides to go back to school. Her college education will presumably enable her to acquire a middle-class status and escape the poverty in which her family lives. Whether or not she will be able to fully assimilate into mainstream American society is a question left unanswered by Pérez.

Iliana's struggle to find a safe place to feel she belongs is a process that many migrants go through. The development of diasporas around the world has led to the reconsideration and redefinition of what it means to be a citizen tied to two diffe-rent geographical locations. As Matthew Frye Jacobson argues, the migrant experience is not only one of arrival and settlement, but one of absence and loss, which locates migrants and their descendants in a diasporic experience, always participating and never completely uprooted from their homelands.[48] However, what makes the diasporic experience of Dominicans unique is how the connection between race and nationalist discourses has had to be reexamined so that Afro-Dominicans are no longer invisible. Reflecting on her experience as a black Do-

[46] *Ibid*., p. 321.

[47] *Ibid*., p. 324.

[48] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

minican immigrant in United States, Dulce Reyes Bonilla declares, "inhabiting a pan-ethnic and pan-immigrant space has, in many ways, forced all of us to deal with difference differently and to see ourselves as Dominicans differently. Moreover, it has helped us redefine the meaning of citizenship and community, doing away with what can become myopic, self-righteous, and ethnocentric nationalism."[49] Pérez hints at this same realization through the process that Iliana has undergone in the novel. Although bound to her Dominican background and family, Pérez's protagonist recognizes the need for adjusting the relationship among culture, language, race, and national identity.

Marina's Body and Mental Disability

Marina's obsessive behavior is the result of a series of traumatic experiences centered on her body. First rejected as a model because of her racial features, later objectified by her coworkers, and finally raped by a Black male astrologer, she hates her body and constantly goes through a revealing self-injuring ritual. Trying to get rid of the source of her suffering, Marina shaves her body hair and scrubs and disinfects her skin from the mold that, she thinks, covers it. Her self-destructive behavior, I contend, is a direct manifestation of the complete physical and psychological dislocation she suffers because of the gendered violence that haunts the Afro-Dominican characters in the story.

Like Iliana, Marina is also a victim of sexual violence. Throughout the novel Pérez explores and emphasizes the consequences of Marina's post-traumatic stress disorder and her inability to cope with her traumatic rape. In contrast with Iliana's resilience, when Marina is raped, she becomes paralyzed by her traumatic memories. Marina constantly relives her rape, "fe[eling] herself fragmented and her limbs recoiling from her desecrated flesh."[50] She tries to cope with her emotional pain

[49] Dulce Reyes Bonilla, "'Primero Puta que Pájara': Sexuality and Dominicanness", in Silvio Torres-Saillant, Ramona Hernández, and Blas R. Jiménez (eds.), *Desde la orilla: hacia una nacionalidad sin desalojos*, Santo Domingo, Manatí, 2004, p. 371.

[50] Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

by splitting her persona into two components, body and soul: "Her body might be snatched, but not her soul. And her body was merely dust. It did not consist of who she was."[51] Rejecting the significance that her body might play in the formation of her identity, she focuses on nourishing her soul, the only aspect of her persona that presumably others cannot touch. Marina's psychological reenactment of her rape literally manifests on her body when she revisits her memories of the rape: "Blood congealed on her lower lip. Bruises swelled throughout her body. Yet she knew that if she informed her parents of what had taken place they would insist that she had dreamed it all… But proof of the events was in her aching body and in its tenacious, rotting smell… confirming that something putrid had been implanted deep inside her."[52] Marina's self-loathing takes over her life and she becomes obsessed with getting rid of the odor that overpowers her body and constantly reminds her of the traumatic experience. She resorts to self-injury and regularly showers in scalding water, concentrating on her vagina. She shaves her entire body, including her pubic hair, and "meticulously scoure[s] herself with Brillo... When her skin blister[s] and she [can] stand the pain no more, she… spray[s] herself with Lysol."[53]

Marina's cleansing ritual is symptomatic of the trauma she has suffered. According to Sigmund Freud's theories developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, this "repetition compulsion" is the psyche's attempt "to process the unassimilable material, to find ways of mastering the trauma retroactively."[54] Unable to translate her mental and physical pain into words, every time she has nightmares about her rape, she attempts to rid her body of any traces from her rapist, as if trying to wash away the memories of her attack. By subjecting her own body to more pain, she is also replacing the initial pain caused by the rape with the immediate, self-inflicted pain of her cleansing routine. In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy explains how "[i]n a traumatic context, repetition can be an attempt to attack one's own fears… but it can

[51] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[52] *Ibid*.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 19.
[54] Luckhurst, *op. cit*., p. 9.

also be a sign of being caught in stasis, of not being able to move on and resolve the initial trauma."[55] Marina's obsession with "physically" removing the traumatic past from her body and mind proves unsuccessful. Gradually losing touch with reality and developing what might seem like irrational behavior, she fails to communicate her anxiety and pain, to the point that sometimes others doubt the veracity of her testimony. Her family and doctors cannot distinguish which came first, the rape or the mental illness.

Since her family does not seem to empathize with her or believe her plight, Marina punishes herself physically to corroborate that the rape happened and that she is not crazy, as her family thinks. Incidentally, the entire reenactment scene of her rape happens right after her parents accuse her of suffering from hallucinations and she sets the kitchen on fire. But she also punishes herself for having resorted to an astrologer for advice, instead of relying on God or her church members ("pagan" practices are forbidden in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church to which she belongs). Self-inflicted injuries are common among women with trauma-related disorders. According to Judith Herman, who has worked with Cambridge Hospital's Victims of Violence Program, self-inflicted injuries are "a method of self-preservation that substitutes physical pain for unbearable emotional pain and produces a sense of calm."[56] Marina's ritual draws our attention to her body and the reasons that lead her to choose this coping mechanism.

Attempting to put an end to her predicament, Marina tries to commit suicide on three different occasions, for which doctors diagnose her as bipolar manic-depressive and schizophrenic.[57] Both doctors and family focus on providing Marina with the pharmaceutical treatment necessary to manage her symptoms. Pérez does not acknowledge any form of psychological treatment, a choice I do not consider accidental. By not having her character undergo any form of psychotherapy,

[55] Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville, Va., University of Virginia Press, 2002, p. 90.

[56] Andrea Nicki, "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma", *Hypatia*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2001, p. 87.

[57] Pérez, *op. cit*., p. 221.

Pérez makes us question several key issues: 1) who determines Marina's treatment?; 2) why would anybody not encourage her to seek help?; 3) what are the consequences of providing Marina with only pharmaceutical treatment?; and 4) why is nobody interested in finding out what led her to develop such a condition? Diagnosing Marina's mental illness is just the first step in the path to recovery, but discovering the root of the problem is just as important. By juxtaposing Iliana's and Marina's rape and developing different outcomes for each of the survivors, Pérez suggests that there is more to Marina's mental illness than the trauma of rape.

Although conditions like schizophrenia and manic depression are mostly caused by neurological problems and genetics, mental illnesses are also connected to the individual's social and cultural environment. Specifically, Andrea Nicki maintains that mental illnesses are "related not only to trauma and abuse but also, more generally, to prejudice, discrimination, sexist socialization, social inequalities, marginalization, or poverty."[58] Nicki thus proposes a liberatory theory of psychiatric disability that "acknowledges the thought and behavior of people broken by personal and social harms as rational responses to various facets of oppression."[59] Consequently, we can read Marina's seemingly irrational and over-emotional behavior not only as a symptom of her mental illness, but also as a response to the discrimination, marginalization, and powerlessness she has had to endure as an Afro-Latina in the United States and the Dominican Republic.

Because of language and cultural barriers, Marina does not have the opportunity to benefit from adequate physical and mental care, support, and resources. The doctors that examine Marina at the hospital prescribe medication for her illness and suggest she should get specialized help. Zoraida, one of Marina's sisters, who can barely speak English, serves as a translator in the conversation among Aurelia, their mother, and the doctors. Both parties fail to understand each other due to language and cultural differences. As a result, Aurelia refuses to acknowledge her daughter's severe condition and rejects

[58] Nicki, *op. cit*., pp. 80-81.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 82.

the doctors' advice. Having Marina institutionalized would imply the family does not have the resources, strength, and love necessary for her recovery. As a mother, Aurelia cannot bring herself to admit her shortcomings. On the other hand, the doctors let the family take Marina home, considering they have gone beyond the call of duty by providing Marina with medication and warning her family. The lack of appropriate treatment and social support exacerbates Marina's condition and severs her connection to reality and family.

Pérez's account of Marina's case serves a twofold purpose. First, it humanizes cases of trauma survivors by recreating and giving voice to an individual's experience, particularly a member of society whose migrant, race, and gender identity renders her invisible. Second, it exposes the connection between gender violence and political power on an individual and institutional level. The way in which both the doctors and the family handle Marina's situation echoes a pervasive cultural attitude toward trauma survivors in general and toward minority women who are victims of rape in particular. In *Worlds of Hurt,* Kalí Tal identifies and criticizes three major coping mechanisms for trauma used in the United States: mythologization, medicalization, and denial.[60] In the eyes of society, the myths of the hypersexual Black woman and the hot-blooded Latina explain and legitimize Marina's rape. Her difficulties dealing with trauma are attributed to the psychological and physical weakness of her gender. Medicating her and denying the existence of a larger problem are easier than recognizing and dealing with the complexities of the rape culture that pervades American society. As Tal maintains, "American culture has redefined traumatic experience to suit mythical views of itself, drawing the focus away from its political implications and the fact that particular groups –especially racial minorities, women, children, and the poor– are targets of abuse."[61]

Geographies of Home dwells on the significance of producing and recording testimony for trauma survivors, as well as analyzing its reception. Not only is it important for Pérez

[60] Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[61] Vickroy, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

to humanize a major social problem like sexual violence, but Marina's story also forces us to address the political implications of how her testimony is perceived. In *Traumatic Possessions*, Jennifer Griffiths reminds us that "[b]earing witness to the suffering of another involves exposing oneself and one's potential as victim, perpetrator, or accomplice", which in turn might lead to the acknowledgement of painful truths. When individuals, institutions, and society in general fail to "provide an 'addressable other,'" Griffiths argues that "the mark of trauma [is reinscribed] onto the racialized or gendered body."[62] Not only does Pérez's text illustrate this very process, but it also further complicates its potential consequences by adding incest as another layer of gender violence.

Pérez's characters are trapped in a cycle of violence that feeds on itself and crosses national boundaries. The members of Marina's family move from the Dominican Republic to the United States in an attempt to escape the poverty and violence of their homeland, where their race works against them as a result of anti-Haitian politics. Ironically, their new home proves to be unsafe, especially for the women in the family. Papito's strict moral code is based on Seventh-Day Adventist beliefs and patriarchal values. As much as his daughters resent the rigorousness of his rules, over the years they have internalized the gender roles and expectations fostered at home. Marina is the perfect example of how women can adopt values that ultimately oppress them. In fact, Pérez makes her the executor of patriarchal punishment when she rapes Iliana, thus blurring the victim/perpetrator boundary. Carine M. Mardorossian considers this a case of "rape by proxy" that perpetuates a rape culture in which the accepted norm is the punishment of women who do not conform to patriarchal values. Paradoxically, Marina defends "the very gendered conventions that ground [her] own violation, seeking to regain the control [she] lost by re-establishing the parameters of patriarchal authority."[63]

[62] Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[63] Carine M. Mardorossian, "Rape by Proxy in Contemporary Caribbean Women's Fiction", in Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (eds.), *Feminism, Literature, and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 32.

Behind Marina's decision to rape her sister is more than mental illness and internalized misogynistic values. In addition to punishing Iliana for transgressing gender boundaries, Marina is making Iliana the target of her internalized racism and self-hatred. Racial categories in the Dominican Republic are complicated by its colonial history and anti-Haitian politics. Like in other Spanish Caribbean and Latin American countries, skin pigmentation is connected to social and economic status. In conjunction with the myth of racial democracy, which romanticizes the notion of *mestizaje* (racial mixture), Hispanic cultures espouse the concept of "bettering/whitening" the race, which "denoted upward social mobility, while blackening was equated with backwardness, poverty and underdevelopment", as Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs remark in their study on Afro-Latin America.[64] Dominicans' attitude toward race is further complicated by the anti-Haitian sentiment encouraged especially by the Trujillo and Balaguer administrations. "Dominican *antihaitianismo*", Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs explain, "emerged as a demonization of the black 'other' and the most blatant denial of race, …with the term *negro* being reserved for Haitians, and *afro-dominicano* euphemistically becoming *indio* (denoting a more acceptable indigenous, as opposed to African, past)."[65]

Marina and her siblings have grown up in an environment that encourages the "whitening of the race" both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States, for colorism is also an issue among African Americans. They have internalized the notion that lighter skin tone and lack of "ethnic features" denote beauty, social acceptance, and upward mobility. In fact, the siblings' rivalries are often predicated on these racial distinctions: "Because Marina had an enviable body, she was made fun of for her long, wide lips and kinky hair. Beatriz, who was beautiful, was ridiculed for her flat nose."[66] Interes-tingly, Marina does not consider herself Black. In

[64] Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, "Introduction", in Minority Rights Group (ed.), *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*, London, Minority Rights Publications, 1995, p. 1.

[65] *Ibid*., p. 10.

[66] Pérez, *op. cit*., p. 192.

fact, when Iliana accuses her of believing that "'anything lighter must be better,'" Marina complains, "'I'm Hispanic, not black.'"[67] As Lucía Suárez points out, "She denies herself, her history, and her links to the expansive world of the African diaspora. The myth of the horrible Haitian translates into the denial of Dominican history."[68] Now that her family lives in Brooklyn, Marina can resort to U.S. racial categories and align herself with the group that allows her to obliterate her African ancestry.

In addition to denying part of her racial identity, Marina has developed very stereotypical notions about Black men, who she believes are "lazy as shit and undependable" like her brothers.[69] The fact that her rapist is a Black man only helps strengthen her color and racial prejudice: "No flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger would claim her soul. No savage with beads dangling from his neck. She would survive all this."[70] Because of her rape, Marina's prejudice against Black men escalates and turns into fear, which manifests itself through her body. For instance, when she unintentionally causes a car crash as she walks down the street daydreaming, Marina is paralyzed by the Black man that comes out of the car: "As he stepped toward the damage, the fear smoldering at the base of Marina's uterus caught flame. Its heat extended through her veins, thawing her feet which had numbed unnoticed and lending her the impetus to flee."[71] Marina relies on racist depictions of Black men as dangerous savages and sexual predators, which eventually lead her to project her hatred towards them onto her sister Iliana. Thus, not only is Marina punishing her sister for behaving and looking like a man by raping her, she is also taking charge and fighting back against her rapist. Her physical and sexual assault on Iliana sheds light onto two of the most determining factors in Marina's life: the misogynist and racist values that limit her experience and opportunities, and ultimately foster her violent behavior and self-hatred.

[67] *Ibid*., p. 38.
[68] Suárez, *op. cit*., p. 159.
[69] Pérez, *op. cit*., p. 38.
[70] *Ibid*., p. 17.
[71] *Ibid*., pp. 86-87.

Conclusion

In the end, Pérez's story suggests that the first step toward breaking the cycle of violence and healing is reconnecting the family to its history in the Dominican Republic and to its family legacy. It is Aurelia, the mother, who realizes they cannot control or undo certain aspects of their lives, such as Marina's schizophrenia and Iliana's rape. Yet, she feels the need to incorporate a balanced relationship to the past in order for the family to understand its legacy and present situation. Reflecting on the importance of exploring the family's Dominican roots, Aurelia recognizes her mistake: "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."[72] Rather than concealing the traumatic memories of the family's past in the Dominican Republic from her children and grandchildren, Aurelia understands the need to unveil the family's secrets and commits to sharing both happy and unhappy memories with her family.

Aurelia's decision to revisit and share memories from the Dominican Republic with her family becomes an empowe-ring process. First, by reclaiming her family past she gains a sense of agency and freedom. She no longer has to feel ashamed of her family legacy or the violence they had to endure during the *Trujillato*. Second, by sharing the devastating consequences of the constant threat of violence in their homeland, Aurelia will give voice to a history often silenced and manipulated by the Dominican government and official historiographies. Passing on their Dominican past to future generations, as Suárez suggests in *The Tears of Hispaniola*, will also lead to the creation of "a space of mourning and an equally urgent need to engage in constructive sociopolitical action."[73] Finally, by generating a dialogue with the youngest generations about the family's legacy from the Dominican Republic and the legacy its members are creating in New York,

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 301.
[73] Suárez, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

the family will be able to better understand and navigate its collective and individual diasporic identity.

For Loida Maritza Pérez, Afro-Dominican women's bodies are anything but invisible. They might be often ignored, misread, or obliterated by official historical accounts and mainstream culture. However, in *Geographies of Home* these bodies serve as visible road maps on which the author draws a complex picture of the traumatic experiences that affect women caught between conflicting categories of identity. Race, ethnicity, gender, and class clash to form an intricate reality that only the most resilient protagonists in the novel eventually learn to navigate. Pérez's work thus emphasizes the need for developing new discourses and approaches that accommodate and provide for the new socioeconomic and political realities of Black communities in the diaspora, as well as other new and growing segments of the U.S. population. "Trauma narratives", according to Laurie Vickroy, "are personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche." Pérez, like other authors of trauma narratives, perceives "trauma as an indicator of social injustice or oppression, as the ultimate cost of destructive sociocultural institutions."[74] Thus, trauma literature reminds us of the need for sustaining a public dialogue and political action to avoid the perpetuation of traumatic experiences and memories.

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[74] Vickroy, *op. cit.*, p. x.