

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

---

1-1-2011

## Colorism in the Spanish Caribbean: Legacies of Race and Racism in Dominican and Puerto Rican Literature

Malinda Marie Williams  
*University of Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Latina/o Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Williams, Malinda Marie, "Colorism in the Spanish Caribbean: Legacies of Race and Racism in Dominican and Puerto Rican Literature" (2011). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 709.  
<https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/709>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

# Colorism in the Spanish Caribbean: Legacies of Race and Racism in Dominican and Puerto Rican Literature

## Abstract

This dissertation explores the impact of colorism on Spanish Caribbean literature—more specifically, works of fiction and memoir by both island and diaspora writers from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Colorism, or discrimination based on the shading of skin, manifests itself in Spanish Caribbean literature in a variety of ways. It is often used as a marker of class and/or class difference; it may reflect and/or play a part in shaping cultural standards of beauty or attractiveness; and it signifies the entrenched complexities of the Spanish Caribbean's history of conquest and colonization. Colorism appears in these texts as both a carryover from Latin America's problematic histories with race (in terms of slavery and racial mixing) and as an indicator of the problematic constructions of race existing (in the past and present) both on these islands and in the United States. Race, constructions of race, and racism have all played a complex role in the histories of these island nations, and it seems only fitting to address as many of these histories as is possible.

This project is divided into two major sections, one on the Dominican Republic and one on Puerto Rico, with a general and theoretical introduction that frames the work within Critical Race Theory and both Caribbean and Latino/a literary studies. The history of Spanish colonialism and a general denial and/or denigration of the African component to the ethnic heritage of these communities results in a construction of race based on a color-continuum model, rather than a binary model; this racial schema, along with Dominican and Puerto Rican concerns with whiteness, skin tone, and "European" phenotypic features, and their denial/denigration of an African heritage, shapes and influences the works of Dominican writers Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, Nelly Rosario, Angie Cruz, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Anney Báez, and Puerto Rican writers Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos-Febres, Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Piri Thomas, and Edgardo Vega Yunqué. The project concludes by drawing connections between Dominican and Puerto Rican experiences and supposing possible impacts of the growing Latino/a population on the racial and cultural makeup of the United States.

## Document Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Ph.D.

## Department

English

## First Advisor

Barbara J. Wilcots, Ph.D.

## Second Advisor

Maik Nwosu

## Third Advisor

Eric Gould

## Keywords

Caribbean, Colorism, Dominican Republic, Latinx, Puerto Rico, Race

---

**Subject Categories**

English Language and Literature | Latina/o Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

**Publication Statement**

Copyright is held by the author. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

COLORISM IN THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN: LEGACIES OF RACE AND RACISM  
IN DOMINICAN AND PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE

---

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

Malinda M. Williams

June 2011

Advisor: Barbara J. Wilcots

©Copyright by Malinda M. Williams 2011

All Rights Reserved

Author: Malinda M. Williams  
Title: COLORISM IN THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN: LEGACIES OF RACE AND RACISM IN DOMINICAN AND PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE  
Advisor: Barbara J. Wilcots  
Degree Date: June 2011

### **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the impact of colorism on Spanish Caribbean literature—more specifically, works of fiction and memoir by both island and diaspora writers from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Colorism, or discrimination based on the shading of skin, manifests itself in Spanish Caribbean literature in a variety of ways. It is often used as a marker of class and/or class difference; it may reflect and/or play a part in shaping cultural standards of beauty or attractiveness; and it signifies the entrenched complexities of the Spanish Caribbean’s history of conquest and colonization. Colorism appears in these texts as both a carryover from Latin America’s problematic histories with race (in terms of slavery and racial mixing) and as an indicator of the problematic constructions of race existing (in the past and present) both on these islands and in the United States. Race, constructions of race, and racism have all played a complex role in the histories of these island nations, and it seems only fitting to address as many of these histories as is possible.

This project is divided into two major sections, one on the Dominican Republic and one on Puerto Rico, with a general and theoretical introduction that frames the work within Critical Race Theory and both Caribbean and Latino/a literary studies. The history of Spanish colonialism and a general denial and/or denigration of the African component to the ethnic heritage of these communities results in a construction of race based on a

color-continuum model, rather than a binary model; this racial schema, along with Dominican and Puerto Rican concerns with whiteness, skin tone, and “European” phenotypic features, and their denial/denigration of an African heritage, shapes and influences the works of Dominican writers Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, Nelly Rosario, Angie Cruz, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Anancy Báez, and Puerto Rican writers Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos-Febres, Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Piri Thomas, and Edgardo Vega Yunque. The project concludes by drawing connections between Dominican and Puerto Rican experiences and supposing possible impacts of the growing Latino/a population on the racial and cultural makeup of the United States.

## Acknowledgments

I am especially thankful to my advisor Barbara Wilcots, not only for sticking with me over these long six years, but also for providing the inspiration for this project in the first place. It was in her graduate class on Whiteness that my interest in colorism was first piqued, and it was in her tutorial on Caribbean literature that I was first introduced to a field I now feel comfortable calling my own. Although you are an excellent administrator, I'm sure your presence is missed in the classroom, Dr. Wilcots!

I would also like to thank my other committee members—Maik Nwosu, Eric Gould, and Javier Torre—for joining in on a project at what seemed like the last minute. I really appreciate your feedback and your willingness to serve.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and guidance throughout this process. A special thank you goes out to my colleagues and “editors” Rodney and Brad who provided invaluable comments and suggestions. To my mother Pam Reed, my brothers Tim and Matt, and my stepmom Bonny Barr—thank you for your presence in my life and for your love and encouragement. And finally, to both my real father Jerry Williams and my surrogate fathers Lynn Griffith, Pete Portoulas, Bob Barr, and William Koon. You have all given me much needed support and/or nagging, when appropriate. I hope I make you as proud of me as I am of all of you.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: Race as a Social Construction, In the Spanish Caribbean and Beyond .....	1
Theories of Race and Whiteness .....	9
Race, Color, and Postcoloniality in the Caribbean .....	20
Colorism in the Spanish Caribbean.....	26
Part One: The Dominican Republic .....	33
History and the Development of a National Character .....	47
The Immigrant Experience .....	62
Caught Between Two Cultures: The Problem of Transnationality.....	74
The Dominican-American Experience .....	87
Conclusion .....	96
Part Two: Puerto Rico.....	102
Writing From the Island: History Both Past and Present.....	116
Writing From the Mainland: Race and Color in the Puerto Rican Diaspora .....	142
Conclusion .....	169
Conclusion: Race and Color at the Crossroads.....	172
Works Cited .....	180

## **Introduction: Race as a Social Construction, in the Spanish Caribbean and Beyond**

“...I have returned to the circular origins of my nothingness, knowing that I am a social construct, a mulatto and a Caribbean woman.”

—Chiqui Vicioso<sup>1</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois famously declared in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk* that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (10). Indeed, racial conflicts plagued the human race throughout the twentieth century, from the United States to Germany, from Rwanda to Bosnia, and across the globe. Racial conflicts did not cease with the end of the twentieth century, however, but have continued into the twenty-first century, not only in places like the Sudan and the U.S.-Mexico border, but on a global scale through the nebulous “War on Terror” waged between the West and Islam. It seems, then, that Du Bois’s “color-line” will continue to play an important role well into this century, and perhaps beyond.

It is significant to note, also, that Du Bois did not articulate this problem as merely a conflict between black and white, but rather defined the color line as “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (10). Du Bois’s prescient use of the words “darker” and “lighter”

---

<sup>1</sup> In “Dominicanyorkness: A Metropolitan Discovery of the Triangle,” p. 66.

forecasts the now widely held belief that race cannot be defined biologically or by hard-and-fast categories. Indeed, there is general consensus today in the sciences, in sociology, in the humanities, and in law that race is a *socially* constructed entity and must be examined not through some mystery of blood lines and genetics (or eugenics, as it were), but rather through historical and sociological means. In many instances, racial difference is determined arbitrarily through constructed ethnic categories, perceived phenotypic distinctions, and gradations of skin shade and color that are thought to carry with them significant determinations of difference. It is this idea of difference that contributes greatly to the lived experiences of racial discrimination throughout the world, across cultures and national boundaries.

Within the field of Critical Race Theory<sup>2</sup> lies the understudied phenomenon of “colorism,” or discrimination based on actual skin color and the shading of skin. This dissertation explores the manifestations of colorism in the context of Spanish Caribbean literature—more specifically, works of fiction and memoir by both island and diaspora writers from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.<sup>3</sup> Colorism manifests itself in Spanish Caribbean literature in a variety of ways. It is often used as a marker of class and/or class difference; it may reflect and/or play a part in shaping cultural standards of

---

<sup>2</sup> Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the academic answer to examining and understanding humans’ experiences with race. The movement began in legal studies and has extended into many other disciplines, including education, sociology, psychology, and the humanities. Generally speaking, its aim is to critically examine the role(s) that race and racism have played in shaping modern culture; this may be achieved, at least in part, through the study of legal precedents and definitions of race, the origins and history of racial formation and discrimination, and rhetorical constructions of race across the globe.

<sup>3</sup> I limit my focus in this dissertation to the literature produced by/about these two nations in part as a matter of scope, but more importantly because I am particularly interested in the concern these cultures have developed with the shades of skin between the two poles of black and white. Each nation has constructed a complex color-continuum model of race (that I will explain in greater depth further in this dissertation), and it is this continuum that both hierarchizes the value of skin shades in interesting ways and attributes significant meaning to not only the poles of light and dark, but those shades in between.

beauty or attractiveness; and it signifies the entrenched complexities of the Spanish Caribbean's history of conquest and colonization. Colorism appears in these texts as both a carryover from Latin America's problematic histories with race (in terms of slavery and racial mixing) and as an indicator of the problematic constructions of race existing (in the past and present) both on these islands and in the United States. Race, constructions of race, and racism have all played a complex role in the histories of these island nations, and it seems only fitting to address as many of these histories as is possible.

One can certainly argue that the study of race and racism in general has finally received the critical attention it deserves in the past two or three decades. A quick keyword search in any library database will likely return thousands of sources written on the topic. A similar keyword search using the word "colorism," however, produces fewer than twenty results, indicating that this topic is still ripe for examination; there is certainly a dearth of research on its appearance within the field of literary studies. As we begin to better comprehend the implications of race on our understandings of the world and human interactions, however, it is assured that we will more thoroughly recognize its influence(s) on artistic production, particularly literary production.

Colorism itself is often conflated with similar racial phenomena, such as the concept of "passing," and it is also sometimes referred to as "skin tone discrimination."<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to the influential collection he edited with colleagues Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton—*Skin/Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the*

---

<sup>4</sup> Recent works on colorism and skin tone discrimination include *Is Lighter Better? Skin-Tone Discrimination Among Asian Americans* (2007) by Joanne L. Rondilla and Paul Spickard; *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* (2009), edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn; *Racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Empirical Analysis of Skin Color* (2008), edited by Ronald E. Hall; and *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, D.C.* (2006) by Audrey Elisa Kerr.

“*Color-Blind*” Era—sociologist Cedric Herring offers the definition of colorism that I have used to direct my critical approach in this project:

“Colorism” is the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same “racial” group on the basis of skin color. It operates both intraracially and interracially. Intraracial colorism occurs when members of a racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of their own race. Interracial colorism occurs when members of one racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of another racial group. (3)

Herring argues that like the concept of race itself, colorism is “historically contingent on supremacist assumptions,” namely the supremacy of European (i.e. White) standards in Western culture (3). These standards do not only include the shade of one’s skin, but also encompass other common phenotypic markers, including hair texture, eye color, and nose and lip shape and size. It is easy to see, then, that the phenomenon of colorism is marked not only by a preference for lightness, but by the overvaluing of a “European” appearance and the devaluing of features associated with an African heritage.

In their book *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall make the argument that within the African American community, intraracial discrimination based on skin color and phenotypic features is “an embarrassing and controversial subject” (1) that is often considered “the ‘last taboo’ among African Americans” (2). Indeed, while the African American community has made great strides in recent decades in terms of civil rights, improved life chances, and equal representation in public, civic, and social spheres, one cannot help but notice a general tendency for the more celebrated figures of this community to have lighter skin; from the light-skinned Halle Berry winning the Oscar for

best actress in 2002 to Barack Obama being elected the first African American president in 2008, a preference for lighter skin seems to permeate our culture. Russell, Wilson and Hall also point out, however, that color-based discrimination is not limited to the African American community; they argue that “[t]hroughout Central and South America, Asia, and even Africa, society is prejudiced against those with dark skin” (41). Herring also points out that while the majority of existing research on colorism has focused exclusively on the African American community, similar patterns of discrimination exist within Latino, Asian American, and even white communities (3).

While it is difficult to indicate a definitive origin of the preference for lightness and the denigration of darkness within any of these communities, Herring considers its origin in the West to be a centuries-long product of European contact with darker peoples, certainly in Africa, but also in the Americas.<sup>5</sup> Herring contends that historically, “Whites probably found Mulattoes more attractive, as they often possessed some European characteristics...[and,] since Whites were believed to be intellectually superior, those Blacks of mixed heritage were advantaged” (4). Because lighter and more European-looking members of this generally disadvantaged community were afforded material and social advantages, then, an overall desire for lightness emerged.

Du Bois also considers the contact of European civilization with “the world’s undeveloped people” to be significant (and in this context, by “undeveloped,” Du Bois most certainly means the world’s darker races) (114). He argues that in the interests of

---

<sup>5</sup> Russell, Wilson and Hall additionally refer to the history of a preference for lightness in non-Western nations. They argue that Aztec women used an ointment to make their skin more golden rather than brown; that Japanese culture prized white skin in women hundreds of years before Western contact; that color-stratification in India is also a marker of caste, with members of the higher castes generally having lighter skin; and that in the Arab world, not only are women with whiter skin more highly prized, but members of the upper classes generally tend to have lighter skin (57).

preserving “all that is really fine and noble and strong” in our civilization, “we are compelled daily to turn more and more to a conscientious study of the phenomenon of race-contact,—to a study frank and fair, and not falsified and colored by our wishes or our fears” (115). It is indeed this compulsion—to both acknowledge and understand the impact that contact between European, African, and indigenous peoples has had on contemporary attitudes about race within the context of the Spanish Caribbean, and its manifestation in the literature of and from this region—that has greatly influenced my current study.

Despite Du Bois’s call in 1903 for the conscientious study of the impact and implications of race on our contemporary world, it has taken scholars until the end of the last and the beginning of the current century to begin to realize his directive. In the introduction to his influential 1986 collection “*Race, Writing, and Difference*,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims that throughout much of the twentieth century, “race” as a category held very little importance in the study of literature and the shaping of critical theory. He argues, “In much of the thinking about the proper study of literature in this century, race has been an invisible quantity, a persistent yet implicit presence” (2). Toni Morrison echoes this sentiment in her landmark 1992 book *Playing in the Dark*, which was one of the first critical texts to examine the often invisible Africanist presence in American literature; Morrison argues that this Africanist presence is necessary to promote and normalize whiteness within the American psyche. Most significantly, however, both Gates and Morrison call for the extension of literary criticism to include honest examinations of the role race plays in both literary production and criticism.

Criticizing the “silence and evasion [that] have historically ruled literary discourse” (9), Morrison claims we need to engage in “a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (12). Additionally, Morrison warns that criticism that claims to be “‘race-free’ risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist” (12). Gates, also, articulates the following directive for critics:

We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us *and* about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the languages we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other. (15)

Both Morrison and Gates draw attention to the need for literary criticism and critical theory that scrutinizes the role race plays in literature, within texts themselves and in the circumstances of literary production. My study hopes to begin to satisfy this need by examining the role of race and color-based discrimination within the understudied body of Spanish Caribbean literature.

In addition to criticizing the absence of adequate literary criticism and theory about race, Gates also points out that within literature itself race serves as “a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems” (5). In other words, race as a trope within literary texts more often than not serves only as shorthand for what the writer wants to appear as some kind of biological or natural difference; however, the reason Gates describes race as “the ultimate trope of difference” is because its application is completely arbitrary (5). Indeed,

if we are to believe, as so many scholars do today, that race is not a natural but a socially-constructed category, then its signifying presence in literature should not be taken merely at face value, but carefully examined and critiqued. This endeavor can certainly be initiated by investigating the socio-historical circumstances that create and maintain understandings of race. To this point, Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that in the study of world literatures, the task of the critic is “to show how historical agency is transformed through the signifying process; how the historical event is represented in a discourse that is *somehow beyond control*” (12), and that the “metaphoricity of the houses of racial memory” is just as important as the “content” within that literature (13). For the purposes of my study, I understand Gates and Bhabha to be saying that we cannot look at race within literature as only an arbitrary trope meant to provide description, but rather we must be critical of how history has shaped our understandings of race and how race-as-metaphor shapes both the production and the reception of literary texts.

Certainly within the context of American literature in the hemispheric sense,<sup>6</sup> the importance of understanding the impact of the history of contact, conquest, colonization, and racial formation<sup>7</sup> on literature cannot be understated. Julio Rodríguez-Luis proposes a

---

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to his book *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat contends that the definition of “American” literature can and should be extended beyond just North American texts, and that the study of the literature of Latin America should not be limited to Latin Americanists. I certainly agree with Pérez Firmat’s assertion; within this dissertation I am interested in the intersections between North American and Spanish Caribbean texts and maintain that because of the interdependency of the cultures of the United States and those of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, it is more fruitful to consider these texts as part of a larger body of “Literature of the Americas” than to look at them independently of one another.

<sup>7</sup> CRT scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55). This term, along with

historical methodological approach to the study of Hispanic literature that not only takes into account general historical data, but also incorporates “the experience of a people as it is expressed in literature” (6). In this way, Rodríguez-Luis argues, an “awareness of historical conditions... could facilitate understanding the ideological patterns that shape the production of literature” (6). With this in mind, my study applies an understanding of the history of the construction of race within the societies of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico to my interpretation of how race functions within select Dominican and Puerto Rican literary texts. CRT pioneers Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that “racial formation is always historically situated” and that our current understandings of race and the construction of race are “merely the present-day outcomes of a complex historical evolution” (61). How the current understandings of race in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and their diaspora communities in the United States evolved in and through the complex histories of slavery, colonization, and globalization in the Spanish Caribbean has a direct and crucial bearing on how those understandings are manifested in literature.

### **Theories of Race and Whiteness**

In his essay “The Social Construction of Race,” CRT and legal scholar Ian Haney López claims that “Race may be America’s single most confounding problem, but the confounding problem of race is that few people seem to know what race is” (193).

Certainly, while scholars, scientists, and academics may have rejected the notion of race

---

other significant racial terminology and understandings of the construction of race will be discussed in greater length in the next section of this introduction.

as a biological reality, that truth and understanding has not necessarily passed on to the world's general population. Even if scholars can maintain that "race" does not exist, as Haney López further argues, "Human fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance" and "race mediates every aspect of our lives" (192). This claim cannot be denied when one looks at statistics on the disparity of economic, professional, and educational life chances between those with light skin and those with dark skin, not only within the United States but in many countries across the globe. Because of its importance in everyday life, then, it is crucial to examine how constructions of race and our understandings of those constructions have developed.

Much of our understandings of race come from our assumptions about what skin and its various shades signifies. In her fascinating study *Skin: A Natural History*, Nina G. Jablonski makes the daring claim that "More than any other part of the body, our skin imbues us with humanity and individuality and forms the centerpiece of the vocabulary of personhood" (3). She states that human skin is unique, not only because it is "naked and sweaty" (2), an anomaly in the world of biology, or because for humans our skin is a "surface for decoration" (3) that tells an intentional story about its inhabitant, but also because "it comes naturally in a wide range of colors" (3). Jablonski traces the evolutionary reasons for the spectrum of skin colors across the human population, claiming that skin shade can indeed tell us about "the nature of the past environments in which people lived" (95), but she rejects the notion that skin color can be used effectively as a marker of racial identity. She argues that despite the belief that there is a connection between skin color and inherited differences that distinguish humans from each other,

there is less genetic difference among geographically dispersed humans than in other similar animal species (95). Skin color difference is just the most obvious way that people vary from one another, and as such it is a convenient way to categorize people into distinct groups, as if that categorization were somehow natural. Like so many scholars who have studied the phenomenon of skin color differentiation, Jablonski believes that segregating humans into races based solely on the color of their skin ignores the role of sociocultural factors in the definition of racial categories. Similarly, rather than relying on biological definitions of race, Haney López defines it as “a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry” (193), and Omi and Winant define race as “*a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*” (55). What is central to all of these conceptions of race is the consensus that it is *socially* constructed.

In addition to defining race as a social construction, Omi and Winant claim that racial formation, which they define as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55), occurs not only because of the influence of various social structures, but also because of cultural factors that attribute to the “origins, patterning, and transformation of racial difference” (56). What this means, then, is that any particular understanding of race must not only take into account the *social* customs, relationships, and institutions that form racial categories, but also the *cultural* ideas, beliefs, and behaviors that give those categories meaning. In the United States, for example, a person is defined as black if they have “one drop” of blood

from an African ancestor. This is not, of course, a natural category, but rather was developed through the social need of early Americans to create some concept of racial purity (and support that concept through the law), and through the continued cultural need to maintain definitive racial categories and differences. In her book *Notes of a White Black Woman*, Judy Scales-Trent maintains that the need to formulate racial norms in the United States began as early as 1662 with anti-miscegenation laws in Virginia, and that by the 1700s, white Southerners operated under the social rule that anyone with any kind of African ancestry would officially be considered black; it did not take long for this social rule to be codified into law (3-4). Even though today these racial purity and anti-miscegenation laws either no longer exist or, if they do, are not necessarily enforced or given credence, their impact on United States' conceptions of race still strongly remain. The "one-drop" rule, then, continues to define who is black in the United States, and, according to Scales-Trent, this perception is generally accepted by both blacks and whites alike (4).

It is important to note that the "one-drop" rule not only defines who is black in the United States, but also who is *not* white, despite any skin-color-evidence to the contrary. Scales-Trent claims that at the genesis of the United States' "one-drop" rule, its developers had other options, including considering those of mixed descent to be white; creating a new, third category; or eliminating the concept of race altogether (4). It is no great stretch to claim that these early Americans did not opt for one of these alternatives because they had a vested interest in preserving whiteness and all the privileges it affords. The benefits of this privilege are still felt today; Omi and Winant claim that "Our ability

to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure” (59), and indeed, without the “clear” definitions of who is white and who is black within the United States, one could not rely on skin color alone to determine racial difference. Haney López argues that “White identity is just as much a racial fabrication [as any other racial identity], and Whites are equally, or even more highly, implicated in preserving the racially constructed status-quo” (192). The primary reason for this, of course, is that any change to the definition of who is white in the United States would mean, in part, that white privilege would begin to lose its meaning, a daunting and terrifying prospect for many.

There are, of course, privileges associated with being “light” as well as those associated with being white. As Matthew Frye Jacobson contends, “race is not just a conception; it is also a perception. The problem is not merely how races are comprehended, but how they are seen” (9). What this means, then, is that how a person is classified racially is not all that matters—how their race is seen and perceived by others is also significant. While the “one-drop” rule may offer a guidepost for how to comprehend who is black in the United States, the rule becomes problematic when it is applied to Latinos/as,<sup>8</sup> who could fall into several different racial designations, even within the same family. Jacobson argues that “American scholarship on immigration has generally conflated race and color,” resulting in a broad understanding of “Latino/a” as a racial designation (6); but as Rodolfo Acuña points out, the U.S. Census Bureau classifies

---

<sup>8</sup> Throughout scholarly literature and the public sphere, the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” are often used interchangeably. Technically, the term “Hispanic” can be applied to peoples in any country that was colonized by Spain (which would conceivably include the Philippines), while Latino/a originated as an abbreviation of “Latin America.” I prefer to use the term “Latino/a,” but do occasionally use the term “Hispanic” in this dissertation, especially when I am referencing the work of a scholar who uses this term.

“Latino/a” as an ethnic, and not a racial group, and Latino/a individuals are allowed to classify themselves racially (24). Given the privileges associated with whiteness, Acuña claims “It is no wonder, then that almost half of U.S. Latinos (48 percent) would classify themselves as ‘white only’ on the 2000 census. Some 42 percent chose another race, and only 4 percent said they were black or African American alone” (27). By claiming a white identity, and in turn a primarily European ancestry, contemporary Latinos/as also lay claim to the benefits afforded whites in this country.

Despite this prevalence of claiming a white identity on a census form, the very need to choose between either black or white is a foreign concept to many Latinos/as, especially for those who are immigrants to the United States; unlike the binary system of racial classification that is imposed in North America, that defines individuals as either black or white, most of Latin America employs a system that recognizes several races, including many intermediate classifications between black and white. Anthropologist Jorge Duany speaks specifically to this point with regard to Caribbean constructions of race:

...Caribbean migrants—especially those coming from the Spanish-speaking countries of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico—tend to use three main racial categories—black, white, and mixed—based primarily on skin color and other physical characteristics such as facial features and hair texture<sup>9</sup>... On the other hand, the dominant system of racial classification in the United States emphasizes a two-tiered division between whites and nonwhites deriving from the rule of hypodescent—the assignment of the offspring of mixed races to the subordinate group... This clear-cut opposition between two cultural conceptions of racial identity is ripe for social and psychological conflict among Caribbean migrants,

---

<sup>9</sup> I believe Duany’s emphasis in this statement is on the word “main.” As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico use many more than three established racial categories, although for purposes of clarity one may conflate the intermediate categories between black and white into a larger “mixed” category.

many of whom are of African or mixed background and are therefore defined as black or colored in the United States. (“Reconstructing Racial Identity,” 274-275)

What is significant to note here is not only the difference between the systems of racial classification in the United States and in the Spanish Caribbean—i.e. two versus several primary racial designations—but that these understandings of race come into conflict with each other when immigrants from these countries enter the United States. There can be long-lasting effects when Latinos/as choose either a white or a black racial identity, if they have the ability to choose at all.

One obvious disadvantage for Latinos/as to classify themselves as black in the United States is that they immediately assign themselves to an existing underclass that has and continues to experience extreme discrimination. In his article “Blacks and Other Racial Minorities: The Significance of Color in Inequality,” Joe T. Darden investigates why “lighter” racial/ethnic groups have achieved higher socioeconomic statuses than blacks, and his conclusion, based on social, economic, educational, and spatial data, is that the “lighter” minorities have more opportunities, in all of these areas. Color, he argues, is one of the primary reasons for this: “Color, unlike ethnicity, is a perceived difference based on kind rather than degree. Therefore, blacks continue to experience more discrimination and segregation and less suburbanization than other groups” (245). The “other groups” Darden refers to include Asians, Native Americans, and Hispanics, but he takes care to note that black Hispanics are subject to the same racial discrimination as North American blacks, thus rendering any possible ethnic advantage useless.

There are, then, significant advantages to having lighter skin within the greater Latino/a community. One of these advantages, according to Elizabeth Martínez, is that lighter Latinos/as “are less threatening in the eyes of white racism and can even ‘pass’—unnoticed, invisible—much more often than African Americans” (471). This ability for light-skinned Latinos/as to pass—which really suggests to become part of mainstream white American culture—means that lighter Latinos/as can avoid many of the harshest forms of discrimination in the United States. For Acuña, this is one of the primary reasons why so many U.S. Latinos/as classified themselves as “white only” or “other” on the 2000 census: “People understood the social and political importance of being white or nearly white” (25).

This understanding of the importance of whiteness is not limited to Latinos/as in the United States, of course; throughout Latin America there is a significant history<sup>10</sup> of the promotion of a white, European heritage and the downplay and denigration of an African heritage, despite the region’s claims of racial heterogeneity and the celebration of miscegenation, or *mestizaje*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Darién J. Davis claims, although “racial and cultural intermingling [historically] constituted important social and cultural realities throughout the region [of Latin America], national politicians and intellectuals neither promoted nor celebrated these trends until the 1920s” (8). He further contends that much of the promotion and celebration of *mestizaje* stressed not only the assimilation of

---

<sup>10</sup> The particular histories of how the preference for lightness came to be in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico will be discussed at length in the content sections following this introduction.

<sup>11</sup> According to Juan E. DeCastro, *mestizaje* can literally mean “miscegenation,” but it can better “be understood as proposing the creation of a homogenous culture or race out of Amerindian, African, and European (Spanish or Portuguese) elements” (xiii).

African cultural elements into the broader culture that favored a Hispanic heritage, but that a “caste system based on color emerged in which blacks occupied the lowest rung” (8). For the most part, this caste system is still in place today and connotes not only a preference for whiteness, but a fear of blackness.

The Latino/a fear of blackness is present in several popular expressions throughout Latin America, including “*La mancha de platano*,” or the stain of the plantain,<sup>12</sup> which connotes the “stain” of blackness and an African heritage. According to Marta Cruz-Janzen, this stain, which cannot be literally washed away, is instead either ignored or rhetorically negated through historical erasure and denial. She writes, “Latinas/os are reluctant to deal with their African past because to do so would mean acknowledging a relation to Africa that is viewed as damaging their self-image and interfering with their struggle for acceptance” (154). Instead, she argues, the contributions of Afro-Latinos/as (and Indians) to Latin American culture are downplayed in official historical accounts; their numbers are minimized in census counts (155); and most significantly, color-based racism “is covertly condoned and promoted in practice, perpetrated by all Latinas/os according to their perceived status in the hierarchy of whiteness that requires a rejection of less-white persons below” (163). These practices are undertaken in an effort to hide, or at least minimize, the presence of blackness in the Latin American racial schema.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cruz-Janzen explains this expression as follows: “This popular adage states what is known but not acknowledged in most Latina/o cultures—that everyone has some non-European blood. A green vegetable resembling a banana, the plantain is white inside but, when touched, quickly produces a stain that darkens to black and sets permanently. *La mancha de platano*—black and Indian heritage—may or may not be apparent but is present in all Latinas/os and cannot be washed away” (148).

I will more fully discuss the origins, manifestations, and after-effects of this fear of blackness and African heritage within the content sections that follow; for the purposes of this introduction, however, it is important to note how this Latino/a fear of the “stain” of blackness is both challenged and reinforced by the black-white racial dichotomy that exists in the United States, as well as how both the North and Latin American racial schemas support systemic forms of white privilege. Cruz-Janzen makes the point that while “U.S. racism enforces the black-white dichotomy...Latina/o racism appeases it” (147). The use of the verb “to appease” in this instance does not solely mean to pacify, but more fully, to pacify by satisfying demands, and in this case they are the demands of racist ideologies that seek to elevate whiteness while denigrating blackness. Although Latin America has recognized its racial heterogeneity and can even be seen at times to celebrate it, as Juan E. DeCastro argues, the resultant “national cultures” that have emerged from the discourse of *mestizaje* still participate in the erasure of the contributions of black and Amerindian culture: “cultural or racial versions of the discourse of *mestizaje* permit the [white] elites to talk about a nation common to all ethnic groups while continuing to exploit the Amerindian and black populations” (22). The result is a culture that continues the tradition of white privilege while hiding behind the guise of beneficent multiculturalism.

Both the tradition of white privilege and the discourse of whiteness continue to play significant roles in North and Latin American cultures alike. Philip C. Wander, Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K. Nakayama define whiteness as “a *historical systemic structural* race-based superiority” that “allows a discussion where no one is a racist and

permits an exploration of ways in which some people happily if unwittingly benefit from and informally reproduce patterns established by racism” (33). The superiority afforded to whiteness is due in part to its invisibility, to its appearing normal. Richard Dyer claims that “White power...reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal” (12). It is obvious that in the North American racial schema, a white racial identity is synonymous with an unmarked (i.e. “normal”) racial identity; while “African” or “Asian” are frequently used as descriptive prefixes to “American,” one rarely hears the prefix “White” being used in the same way, as a white racial identity tends to be the default description of who is an American.

While Latin America may not rely on the same binary construction of race as North America does, the default understanding of who is Dominican, Puerto Rican, Colombian, Argentinean, Brazilian, etc. is still based on a white European archetype. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek refer to this phenomenon as the strategy of the discourse of whiteness: it “*confuses whiteness with nationality...the vision of whiteness is bounded by national borders and recenters whiteness*” (99). They further contend that “To conflate nationality and ‘race’ is an expression of power since it relegates those of other racial groups to a marginal role in national life” (100). The black-white racial dichotomy in the United States realizes this expression of power by connoting “white” with American, and through the use of hyphenated identities for anyone who is not white; the multiracial schema in Latin America realizes the same expression of power, however, by privileging a national identity that is inherently white, despite any claims of racial heterogeneity.

## **Race, Color, and Postcoloniality in the Caribbean**

A significant result of both the privileges that are afforded to whiteness and the prominence of white identity in national psyches is that whiteness itself becomes an object of desire, while blackness becomes something to disparage, disregard, and eradicate. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon laments, “As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white” (xiv). Fanon recognizes that, especially within the Caribbean, the desire for whiteness and all the privileges it provides is incredibly strong and has resulted in a “vicious cycle” of whites denigrating blacks and blacks trying to “prove at all costs” that they are equal to whites (xiv). A common move within this cycle is the cultural imperative to “whiten the race,” examples of which exist in many Caribbean nations. Fanon refers specifically to its manifestation in Martinique:

In a word, the race must be whitened; every woman in Martinique knows this, says this, and reiterates it. Whiten the race, save the race, but not along the lines you might think; do not safeguard “the originality of that part of the world in which they grew up,” but ensure its whiteness. (29-30)

“Ensuring the whiteness” of the race can be taken both literally and figuratively; there exists throughout the Spanish Caribbean (and other parts of Latin America) a desire to literally whiten the race through selective breeding and miscegenation;<sup>13</sup> there also exists the figurative desire to culturally whiten the race by adopting standards of white culture. Fanon exemplifies this desire through the figure of the mulatto girl who gains acceptance

---

<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon, the cultural imperative to “whiten the race” by “marrying white,” will be discussed in much more detail in the content sections that follow this introduction.

into the white community through her “overcompensating behavior. She was no longer the girl wanting to be white; she was white. She was entering the white world” (40).

Alfred J. López argues that this desire to enter and be a part of the white world is both an inevitable outcome and a primary control strategy of colonialism. In his book *Posts and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism*, he contends that “for the colonial subject whiteness becomes synonymous with material success and class mobility” and that “[t]he ideal of whiteness, then, emerges as an indispensable component of a colonialism that would establish itself upon arrival as the universal standard of civilization, to which colonial subjects are compelled to aspire” (95). Significantly, López argues that this “will to whiteness,” as he phrases it, is unattainable for colonial subjects, either as an ontological or physical fact, and it does not disappear with the end of colonialism, but rather exists as an “insidious and abstract form of a *desire*, and a tacit standard against which all who remain as part of the new postcolonial state are measured” (95). Here López echoes the claims of Fanon, who states that “the juxtaposition of the black and white races has resulted in a massive psycho-existential complex” (xvi), one which leaves “the black man who strives to whiten his race...as wretched as the one who preaches hatred of the white man” (xii). This wretchedness takes the form of the vicious cycle mentioned earlier and can only be eradicated, according to Fanon, by analyzing it and by urging those within the cycle, either black or white, “to shake off the dust from that lamentable livery built up over centuries of incomprehension” (xvi).

Fanon’s desire to “shake off the dust” of colonialism is easier wished for than accomplished, of course, especially within the geographic and psychic region of the

Caribbean. In their influential book *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue that within the Caribbean, “the European imperial enterprise ensured that the worst features of colonialism throughout the globe would all be combined in the region,” not least of which were the genocide of indigenous populations and some of the worst circumstances of slavery, including both forced and indentured plantation labor (144). They describe Caribbean life as having a “brutal texture,” developed in no small part by forced clashes of culture and forced miscegenation (144). Most importantly, though, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out the continued importance of the issues of race and ancestry in the Caribbean, “crucial not just to philosophy but to the dynamics of day-to-day survival. This had to be so in a society which bore the permanent traces of conflict, repression, immigration, and forced migration” (145). Race and conceptions of race, then, are living reminders of the Caribbean’s troubling colonial past.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo makes a similar claim in his seminal text *The Repeating Island*; he argues that the particular historical circumstances of the Caribbean have resulted in the concept of “social class” being replaced, or displaced, by the concept of “race,” or more specifically, by “skin color” (200). This skin color, he argues, “is a color in conflict with itself and with others,” a phenomenon he calls a “double conflict of the skin” (201). Benítez-Rojo claims that all Caribbean literature generally refers itself to this double conflict<sup>14</sup> and that “Caribbean literature cannot free itself totally of the multiethnic

---

<sup>14</sup> There is, of course, an obvious connection between Benítez-Rojo’s concept of “double conflict” and Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness,” which he describes thus: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an

society upon which it floats, and it tells us of its fragmentation and instability” (27).

Caribbean literature, then, reflects the circumstances and realities of its inhabitants, one where “every Caribbean person...feels his skin as a territory in perpetual conflict, as a trench that he must take and claim for his Self, or else surrender unconditionally to the Other” (236). Significantly, Benítez-Rojo surmises that even if the racial makeup of the Caribbean as a whole were to become entirely mixed, the Caribbean conflict of the skin would not abate; it would merely be expressed differently, through multiple shades of color instead of only black and white. This is indeed what is and has been occurring in the Spanish Caribbean for hundreds of years.

Sociologist H. Hoetink contends in his essay “‘Race’ and Color in the Caribbean” that it is the particular developmental histories of the plantation economies in the Spanish Caribbean that have resulted in an increased focus on intermediate shades of skin, rather than the extremes of black and white. He argues that in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico in particular there were significant periods of time where plantations were not a substantial part of the overall economy and culture; this allowed for greater mixing amongst European, African, and Amerindian groups, which in turn resulted in a less severe separation between the races.<sup>15</sup> This extensive racial mixing culminated in a greater range of physical traits (including skin color and phenotypic features) throughout society, and even within individual families. The wide variance of skin colors and phenotypic features gave way to a complicated color-continuum model of racial

---

American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (3).

<sup>15</sup> A full explanation of the history and evolution of the plantation within both the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico and their impact on conceptions of race within those societies will be discussed in greater detail in the content sections that follow this introduction.

classification that remains in the Spanish Caribbean today. Hoetink conversely argues that the plantation economies in the non-Hispanic Caribbean “knew no such interruption, and ‘racial’ divisions there were generally more clear-cut” between black and white (58). Even within the color-continuum model, however, “the higher social prestige of ‘light’ color did not disappear” (58), and in fact still remains, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In her book *Voices Out of Africa in Twentieth-Century Spanish Caribbean Literature*, Julia Cuervo Hewitt makes the argument that this preference for lightness paradoxically both stems from and perpetuates the negation of African elements in Caribbean Hispanic societies. She states that despite the “Caribbean logic” inherent in the idea that being mulatto “is different from being white, black, or Indian,” and that “the notion of racial and cultural simultaneity [is] a condition for being Caribbean” (18), the addition of the African element to the equation complicates the notion of self for many Spanish-speaking Caribbean writers, in part because they may not have “a clear and obvious African ancestry” (25). The value placed on lighter skin and the development and cultivation of intermediate races between the poles of black and white, then, are in part an effort to erase or deny the African element in Spanish Caribbean heritage.

This effort to “erase” Africa also brings to mind the conflict between the notions of *consent* and *descent* articulated by Werner Sollors in his book *Beyond Ethnicity*. Sollors sees definitions of race as stemming from either the idea of a natural descent that is determined by heredity and ancestry or from the idea of a contractual and self-made category that is consented upon by those it affects (5-6). Sollors maintains that Latin American societies in general tend to be more “consentist” (37), and in the case of

Spanish Caribbean societies, African descent is more often than not either ignored or denied in favor of cultural consent that replaces it with both a white ideal and a system of agreed-upon intermediate categories that lead up to that white ideal. In other words, racial consent in the Spanish Caribbean means that one is not necessarily born black but can consent to a racial definition that categorizes him or herself as something other than black, thus eliminating any need to acknowledge an African descent.

The notion of race as a matter of consent is indeed a crucial feature of Spanish Caribbean society, but its ubiquity is made possible in large part by the ubiquity of racial mixing and miscegenation itself. Earl E. Fitz goes so far as to claim that miscegenation can serve as the defining metaphor for the American experience.<sup>16</sup> For Fitz, miscegenation should be viewed not only in its traditional biological sense, but also in a cultural sense; in the Americas, racial mixing results not only in new ways that people can look but in new cultures and ways of living. More importantly, though, he charges scholars to view miscegenation as “a normal, legitimate, and fully empowered part of our multifaceted American reality,” because within the context of contemporary literature of the Americas, it “speaks to all aspects of our diverse American cultures” and “defines who we really are” (269-270).

Fitz’s sentiments about miscegenation are also echoed in the work of Edouard Glissant, particularly in his essay “Caribbean Philosophy.” In this text Glissant asserts two significant points: first, that the idea of creolization, or the creation of mixed and composite cultures, should no longer be viewed in opposition to or as less-than the idea of “unique” or “pure” cultures; and second, that composite cultures themselves no longer

---

<sup>16</sup> Again, I mean “American” in the hemispheric sense of the word.

need what he refers to as the “myth of Genesis”<sup>17</sup> in order to sustain or preserve themselves (542). What is needed instead, according to Glissant, is a recovery and reconstitution of the “haunting nature of the past,” especially in circumstances where that past has been obliterated by the painful legacies of colonialism (544). I contend that this recovery can occur not only in primary works produced in the Americas, but also in scholarly works that both recognize and recover the impact of the past on the consciousnesses of cultures and writers and texts within those cultures, and I consider my project to be part of this scholarly recovery.

### **Colorism in the Spanish Caribbean**

In his essay “At the Crossroads of Race: Latino/a Studies and Race Making in the United States,” Tomás Almaguer reiterates Du Bois’s declaration that the problem of the color line is the defining problem of the twentieth century. In doing so, he makes the following argument:

...contemporary analyses must contextualize race and theoretically justify the racial categories they use. In the process, the important project of studying the powerful effects of the “color line” can and must be closely tied to the study of the construction of the “color line” itself. (216)

This statement summarizes the primary goal of this dissertation. In the sections that follow, I examine primary literary works by island and diaspora writers from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico through the lens of the construction of the color line. More specifically, I am interested in the ways that colorism, a preoccupation with

---

<sup>17</sup> The “myth of Genesis” that Glissant refers to is the idea that cultures must originate in some kind of “pure” circumstance in order to be real. This is impossible in the context of the Caribbean, of course, where European, African, and Amerindian cultures combined to create a new culture that is inherently diverse.

intermediate shades of skin, and the denial and denigration of an African heritage shape the Dominican and Puerto Rican color lines. I begin each section with a historical overview of the origins and development of the particular construction(s) of race that exist in each country and culture and use this framework to support my interpretations of moments within a wide array of literary texts that reflect, expose, and at times criticize these constructions. My interpretations are always situated within historical, sociological, and cultural realities and I use research from the fields of anthropology, sociology, history, cultural studies, and literary studies to support my conclusions.

Central to an understanding of the ways that race is constructed in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, and the impact of shades of skin on the lived experiences of individuals from these cultures, is an acknowledgment of the problematic role that Africa and African heritage plays in these cultures. Morrison tells us that “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness” (65), and this is certainly true not only in the North American context in which she writes, but also in the Latin American and Caribbean context from which the primary texts I examine in this dissertation emerge. Indeed, as Cuervo Hewitt argues, “the signifying difference Africa represents in Spanish Caribbean fiction [is] charged with a sense of resistance and defiance against social values, political hegemonies, cultural negations, and colonial and neocolonial myths of racial and religious purity” (22). The texts I examine in this project reflect the myriad cultural reactions to African heritage that exist in the societies from which they come; at times, these texts reify cultural stereotypes about the role that Africa plays in their cultural makeup, but more often than not these texts both elucidate and challenge existing

notions of race, and resist the status quo that would seek to define their national characters as primarily European and white.

While both sections of this dissertation are concerned with the ways that race and colorism impact the primary texts I examine, and while the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico do share similar histories that have shaped their contemporary constructions of race, each nation and culture has a distinct primary racial myth that drives beliefs and attitudes about skin color and European and African phenotypic features. For the Dominican Republic, this myth involves its complicated relationship with its neighbor to the west—Haiti. There exists in the Dominican Republic an elaborate anti-Haitian ideology that designates only Haitians as black and of African descent. This *antihaitianismo*, as it is known, contrasts the identity of black, African Haitians with the presumed white, Hispanic identity of Dominicans. The elaborate skin color continuum that exists in the Dominican Republic stems in large part from this ideology. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, do not deny outright the African component of their heritage and instead rely on the myth that they are a harmonious “rainbow” people who value the European, indigenous, and African roots of their family tree equally. Despite the outward appearance of equality, however, the lived experiences of dark-skinned Puerto Ricans and those whose features lean more towards African rather than European phenotypes, expose the inconsistencies in this cultural myth; in reality, the African root of the Puerto Rican family tree is not valued as equally as the European, and even the indigenous root.

The authors of the primary texts I examine include writers who were born on the islands and writers born in the United States. Their work, as well, reflects life both on the

islands and in the diaspora, in locations with significant Dominican and Puerto Rican im/migrant<sup>18</sup> communities such as New York and New Jersey. While geographical purists may protest my inclusion of Dominican-American and mainland<sup>19</sup> Puerto Rican writers in this survey of Spanish Caribbean work, I believe any scholar would be remiss not to include work from the diaspora in a consideration of the literature of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Indeed, as Efraín Barradas argues,

if we pay even a minimum of attention to the work of...Caribbean writers in the United States, we immediately realize that theirs is not a body of work that can be discarded, that it is not a mere erudite nicety to take their writing into account when compiling a history of the Spanish Caribbean. (85-86)

Barradas claims that the quantity of work by diaspora writers alone warrants its inclusion in the Spanish Caribbean canon; I would add to this argument the increasing amount of scholarly work on diaspora writers that does not make a significant distinction between those writing on and those writing off the island.<sup>20</sup>

It is also important to acknowledge the fact that while this dissertation seeks to make connections between the ways that color and race are constructed and understood in two Spanish Caribbean nations and cultures, I have intentionally not included Cuba in the present discussion. Like the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, the Cuban conception

---

<sup>18</sup> Because Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, I prefer to refer to mainland Puerto Ricans as migrants rather than immigrants and as such make a distinction between them and Dominican immigrants throughout my text.

<sup>19</sup> My use of “mainland” throughout this dissertation refers to the mainland United States.

<sup>20</sup> I take up this issue in greater detail in the sections that follow, specifically when I begin to write about primary texts that are either written by diaspora writers or are set in im/migrant communities in the United States.

of race does acknowledge more than the two poles of black and white,<sup>21</sup> but within Cuban culture and literature, there is less of a particular concern with the myriad intermediate shades between these two poles. Lillian Guerra and Jan Rogziński both point out that the plantation system in Cuba was a more visible and important part of the economy than it was in either the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico (222; 207); because of its increased presence, plantation life was also more brutal in Cuba and resulted in sharper distinctions between the extremes of black and white. While intermediate categories do certainly exist in Cuba, as Hoetink claims, “the intermediate range of coloreds ultimately constituted only a tiny proportion of the total population” (“Race’ and Color, 66) and “in Cuba [today] the extreme ends of the continuum appear to be more visible and more numerous now than the population in between” (“Race’ and Color, 68). Indeed, the descriptor “Afro-Cuban” is certainly heard more frequently than either “Afro-Puerto Rican” or “Afro-Dominican.” As such, contemporary works by Cuban and Cuban American writers do not exhibit the same considerable concern with shades of skin and the intermediate categories between black and white as do the works of contemporary Dominican and Puerto Rican writers. Additionally, much of the work that has emerged from the Cuban and Cuban American communities in the past fifty years tends to focus on Cuba’s political situation and is less concerned with lived experiences of race and racism, and

---

<sup>21</sup> In Cuba and Cuban literature, the “third” racial category between black and white is most often referred to simply as “mulatto/a.” Suzanne Bost argues that the figure of the *mulatta/o* is a dominant cultural symbol in Cuban culture and is often meant “to reflect the fusion of black and white” (102). Similarly, Claudette M. Williams notes that the sexualized figure of the *mulata* in nineteenth-century Cuban poetry reflected a “real fear of social dominance that the white ruling class perceived in the disturbing numerical increase of mulattoes in colonial Cuba” (71). More often than not, however, contemporary Cuban and Cuban American literature does not contain any notable treatments of distinctive racial categories beyond that of *mulatto/a*.

especially of colorism, than Dominican and Puerto Rican works.<sup>22</sup> As such, I have opted to focus my study on the more prevalent instances of colorism within literature from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. A more in-depth study of the effects of racism and racial bias on literature within Castro's Cuba would certainly be worthwhile, but it is beyond the scope of this current project.<sup>23</sup>

Part One of my project focuses on the Dominican Republic. This part begins with a historical and ideological discussion of the history of racial and color bias in the Dominican Republic, and I pay particular attention to the ideology of *antihaitianismo*. The first section, "History and the Development of a National Character," looks at works by writers Julia Alvarez and Nelly Rosario that concern nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dominican society. The next section, "The Immigrant Experience," looks at the conflicts between Dominican and North American conceptions of race in works by Alvarez, Junot Díaz, and Angie Cruz. Following this, the section "Caught Between Two Cultures: The Problem of Transnationality" examines additional works by Díaz and Cruz in terms of how many Dominicans must straddle identities between their Dominican and North American selves. Finally, the section "Novels of the Dominican American Experience" examines works by Loida Maritza Pérez and Annecy Báez that focus on experiences of North American-born Dominicans.

---

<sup>22</sup> A few notable exceptions to this claim include Carlos Moore's 2008 memoir *Pichón*, which chronicles his experiences of racism as an Afro-Cuban inside Castro's Cuba, and some of the works of Cuban American author Oscar Hijuelos that reflect his experiences as a light-skinned Cuban, including select moments in *Our House in the Last World* (2002) and *Dark Dude* (2009).

<sup>23</sup> If one were to develop an operating Cuban cultural myth about race, along the same lines as *antihaitianismo* in the Dominican Republic and the myth of racial harmony in Puerto Rico, it might be the myth that in Castro's Cuba, the revolution eradicated racism, which is challenged by Moore's aforementioned memoir.

Part Two of my project focuses on Puerto Rico. Like Part One, this Puerto Rican section begins with the presentation and analysis of historical factors that have contributed to contemporary constructions of race in Puerto Rican society and culture, and I pay particular attention to the myth of racial harmony that exists in contemporary Puerto Rico. The first section, “Writing from the Island: History Both Past and Present,” looks at works by island-born writers Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, and Mayra Santos-Febres that concern historical experiences of race- and color-bias on the island, from the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. In the next section, “Writing from the Mainland: Race and Color in the Puerto Rican Diaspora,” I look at works by North American-based Puerto Rican writers Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Piri Thomas, and Edgardo Vega Yunqué that concern the contemporary experiences of race- and color-bias of Puerto Ricans living in the United States.

I conclude my project with a brief articulation of the connections between these two nations and cultures; an indication of what the future holds for research into the growing Latino/a community in the United States; and future possibilities for additional studies of the construction of race and colorism, especially in literary studies.

## **Part One: The Dominican Republic**

Although the population of the contemporary Dominican Republic consists of nearly 90% blacks and mulattoes (Torres-Saillant, “Tribulations,” 1086), it is considered to be, and often notoriously so, an anti-black nation that has held on to a constructed myth of a Hispanic and indigenous heritage while systematically and rhetorically erasing its Africanist heritage. Indeed, the Dominican nation offers particularly “juicy material” when it comes to the “race question,” according to Dominican scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant (“Meditations,” 21).<sup>24</sup> One of the primary reasons for this salacious interest in the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola is the perception, both real and imagined, that Dominicans either reject or refuse to acknowledge their blackness, leading them to seem ignorant “about themselves as racial beings” and extreme in the lengths “to which they would go to distance themselves from blackness, whether theirs or that of others” (Torres-Saillant, “Meditations,” 20). However, as Torres-Saillant further argues, “the Dominican case does not differ radically from the overall state of blackness in America” (“Meditations,” 21) and scholars will be remiss if they dismiss or deny its importance in the understanding of more regional conceptions of race. After all, the Dominican Republic is the “inaugural site of the African presence in the Americas” and the

---

<sup>24</sup> Readers will note that I extensively reference the work of Silvio Torres-Saillant in this section. Dr. Torres-Saillant, a Professor of English at Syracuse University, is considered the preeminent Dominican scholar in the United States. As the founder of the Dominican Studies Institute in New York City and the leading scholar on Dominican blackness and the Dominican diaspora, his scholarship is crucial material for any comprehensive study of Dominican and Dominican American issues.

“birthplace of the plantation, the economic institution that gave blackness its modern significance” (“Meditations,” 22). An understanding of how both historical and ideological forces have shaped conceptions of race in the Dominican Republic, then, have long-reaching implications for the understanding of blackness throughout the Caribbean.

When Columbus arrived on the island that would later be known as Hispaniola<sup>25</sup> in December 1492, he was met by the peaceful Taíno Indians and took note of their golden ornaments, deducing that this island contained deposits of the coveted element. This “discovery” led to the first permanent European settlement in the New World, named Santo Domingo, where Spanish colonists both depleted the island of its gold and decimated its indigenous population, due to harsh working conditions and a devastating smallpox epidemic (Moya Pons 37). The economy of the island then turned to cattle raising and sugar production, which were mostly overseen by bureaucrats since much of the colonial population had moved on to Mexico where there was rumored to be silver and another Indian population to serve as a workforce (Moya Pons 38). It was under this economic schema that the importation of African slaves first took place. Although Europeans had not previously differentiated between black and Indian slaves, the advent of the plantation economy necessitated the development of a system “of racial prejudices among Europeans in order to justify the exploitation of black human beings by labeling them as ‘inferior’” (Sagás 22). This idea of “inferiority” grew to include both physical and moral characteristics, including the idea that blacks were biologically inclined to

---

<sup>25</sup> The native Taínos called the island “Quisqueya,” a word that is still used by Dominicans today to refer to their nationality.

“laziness, dishonesty, and intellectual inferiority” (Sagás 23), thus setting the groundwork for future discrimination.

The African population grew tremendously in Santo Domingo and by 1546 “there were already some 12,000 slaves compared to the white population of less than 5,000” (Moya Pons 40). The sizeable demographic difference between the white and black population made the colony difficult for the Spanish to control, “and from the very beginning, the slaves continually rebelled or escaped” (Moya Pons 40). Although the Spanish were able to temporarily quell any significant rebellion, the port of Santo Domingo became less and less significant as navigation routes to and from the island became more dangerous due to mounting pressure from Spain’s enemies—the English, French, and Dutch. Without a means to export goods, “the sugar mills gradually stopped producing and the ginger farms were abandoned” and “by 1630, the slave population was insignificant since most slaves had either died or fled to the mountains” (Moya Pons 50).

The decline of sugar production in Santo Domingo resulted in a colony that was largely ignored by Spanish authorities with an economy that relied more heavily on cattle ranching, an endeavor that, unlike sugar production, gave both slaves and owners a fair amount of free time (Sagás 23). This laxity gave a unique character to the nature of race relations in Santo Domingo, including the opportunity for blacks and mulattos to occupy midlevel administrative positions in the colonial government, and, more significantly, widespread miscegenation, particularly among the lower classes. Ernesto Sagás points out, “With the possible exception of the white upper classes, the colonists of Santo

Domingo freely mixed, giving way by the eighteenth century to the first major mulatto community in the world” (24).

By the seventeenth century, this racially mixed population had also equalized itself socioeconomically, according to Dawn Stinchcomb, but this blending of racial and socioeconomic classes necessitated a differentiation between the descendants of the Spaniards and the descendants of their African slaves. Stinchcomb contends that

Dominicans recognized only two groups that would define Domincanness: *blancos* (whites and lighter mulattoes) and *blancos de la tierra* (darker mulattoes). As for the majority of the population, which was black—the *negros* (slaves or the offspring of African slaves)—their existence in Dominican discourse began to be erased. (3)

This erasure, however, did not take place literally but rather ideologically, through the emphasis of Hispanic over African culture. Sagás notes that even slaves on the eastern half of the island “considered themselves superior to the slaves of the west, by the simple fact that they possessed a Hispanic culture” (25). This *Hispanidad* was emphasized in everyday life as well as from the pulpits of the Catholic Church, where priests were regularly preaching the virtues of white Hispanic values. To be a *blanco de la tierra*, then, had little to do with phenotypic qualities, but rather a sense of superiority because “they had been born Creole and not African” (Sagás 29).

Thus, one of the most significant myths of the Dominican Republic—that it is in essence a white nation—was born initially from both a colonial need to hang on to a Spanish heritage at the expense of an African one, and from an early ideological understanding that skin color alone does not determine one’s race—that it can be created and imagined through cultural and national practices. Indeed, as Sagás points out,

“Foreign visitors to Santo Domingo were surprised—not to mention amused—by the fact that blacks referred to their western neighbors as ‘those Negroes’” (25). What began as an ideological need to define race in cultural terms in the colonial period, however, took on tangible need in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century as control of the eastern half of Hispaniola passed first into French hands and then, after the revolution, into a Haitian occupation that would last over twenty years and have an irrevocable impact on Dominican attitudes towards race.

Although the Spanish had ceded Santo Domingo to the French in 1795, colonial elites continued to hold on to their ties to Spanish culture, arguing that innumerable natural differences would make integration between the two societies impossible. Still, while domination by a white French colonial force was not ideal, it was preferred by many in Santo Domingo to the idea, and later the reality, of domination by the black armies of the new nation of Haiti, which had gained its independence from France in 1804. Despite a brief return of Santo Domingo to the Spanish crown from 1809-1821, the eastern part of Hispaniola was officially annexed to Haiti in 1822. While this annexation was accepted and even celebrated by most of the lower classes (who were primarily black), it was wholly rejected by the elite white Hispanics on the island, who “resented being at the mercy of individuals whom they considered inferior, due to their skin color and social status” (Sagás 30). As a result, scores of these elite families abandoned the island and resettled in one of many remaining Spanish colonies, a fact that Sagás points out was “deplored by Hispanophile historians, who commented that Santo Domingo lost most of its ‘best’ families at that time” (30).

Ultimately, the Haitian regime failed in their attempt to unite Hispaniola under one common government, due in large part to perceived insurmountable cultural differences, and a revolutionary movement that began in 1843 led to Dominican independence in February of 1844. Cultural differences, however, were not enough for Dominicans (including both *blancos* and *blancos de la tierra*) to distinguish themselves from their western neighbors—they needed to separate themselves from Haitians through a distinctive racial paradigm as well. Thus, Dominicaness necessarily became defined through its opposition with Haitianness: if Haitians were black, then by definition Dominicans were *not* black, despite any phenotypic evidence to the contrary.

Many scholars attribute the development of the complex construction(s) of race in the Dominican Republic to this anti-Haitian sentiment, or as Sagás phrases it, *antihaitianismo* ideology (39). Essentially, *antihaitianismo* is a deep-rooted philosophy that differentiates Dominicans from Haitians in cultural, religious, and racial terms. In his book *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*, David Howard describes it as follows: “The Other [i.e. the Haitian] is invariably perceived as black, heathen and alien to white, Spanish *dominicanidad* or ‘Dominicanness.’ Haiti in popular prejudice, stands for all that is allegedly not Dominican: *négritude*, Africa and non-Christian beliefs” (5). Even those Dominicans who were clearly of African descent participated in the re-writing of their history by emphasizing not only their European Spanish roots, but their professed indigenous roots as well. Unlike Haitians, Dominicans considered themselves to be the descendants of both the *conquistadores* from Spain and the Taíno Indians who had populated the island in the pre-Columbian era, despite the fact

that the Taínos had been decimated by disease and abuse in the sixteenth-century. As Sagás argues, Dominicans’ “fabricated Indian ancestry also created a mythological national past, with deep roots in the prehistory of the island, which gave the Dominican nation a sense of continuity and helped it repress its traumatic colonial history” (35). The word *indio*, in fact, has become a very common racial descriptor used in the Dominican Republic to indicate someone who is very dark-skinned. According to Howard, the term gained both popular and official use during the Trujillo era<sup>26</sup> to “distance somatically the Dominican nation from its Haitian neighbor and African ancestry” (41). Indeed, the word *negro*, or black, is principally used to refer to someone who is Haitian, and is generally only used to describe a Dominican as an insult or an indication of Haitian roots.

*Indio*, however, is just one in a panoply of creative terms used to describe shades of skin tone in the Dominican Republic. Some other common descriptors include *trigueño/a*, *rosadito/a*, *desteñido/a*, *rubio/a*, and *cenizo/a*, which Howard identifies as “wheat-colored, rosy, faded, blond or fair, and dark or ashen,” respectively (9). Even *indio* itself is embellished with the adjectives “*oscuro/a*, *quemado/a*, *canelo/a*, *lavado/a* and *claro/a*—dark, burnt, cinnamon, washed and clear” (Howard 41). These subtle variations between shades carry great significance in the Dominican Republic and play a large role in determining Dominican ethnicity.<sup>27</sup> As Stinchcomb contends, articulating these gradations is part of “a conscious effort on the part of the government to create a

---

<sup>26</sup> This era includes the years 1930-1961.

<sup>27</sup> Dominican racial descriptors are not only used for casual reference, but are included on official State documents, including driver’s licenses and identification cards.

people of common origins and national history” (13), primarily because they differentiate Dominicans rhetorically from blackness, and subsequently from Haitianness.

What is significant about the skin color continuum in the Dominican Republic, however, is not just how it erases an African heritage, but also how it privileges whiteness. In his study of black racial identity in the Dominican Republic, political scientist Richard T. Middleton argues that the country operates within the framework of a pigmentocracy, or “a consensually agreed upon racial hierarchy rooted in skin pigmentation [where] Whites are assumed to be the dominant group, mixed-race individuals the middle, and blacks the subordinate group” (569). This hierarchy manifests itself in Dominican life through both socioeconomic status and conceptions of beauty.

As is true throughout much of the Caribbean, social elites tend to have a lighter skin color and the reasons for this are numerous. Historically, not only are elite families more likely to trace their ancestry back to European origins, but they have also tried to maintain their white origins through the practice of “marrying light.” This practice is not limited to the social elite, however; as Howard maintains, “Ambitions of ‘marrying lighter’ express the widely recognized view that marriage to a lighter partner may enhance social status, or increase the opportunities for offspring by ‘improving the color’ of a darker-skinned parent” (54). Hence, a lighter skin color is not only a marker of an existing high social status but an indicator of future social and economic opportunities through increased social mobility.

Light skin color is also connected to Dominican definitions of beauty but so are European phenotypic features such as straight hair and a narrow nose. In fact, as Howard

points out, descriptions of race in the Dominican Republic are often characterized through aesthetic terms that attach value to a more white appearance: “The regular correlation of ‘bad hair’ and ‘ordinary’ features, and their juxtaposition *vis-à-vis* the desired traits of ‘straight’ hair and ‘fine’ features, manifests itself through a bias for European, and now North American, identity in terms of aesthetics and culture” (9). Torres-Saillant shares his personal experience with this bias in his essay “One and Divisible: Meditations on Global Blackness.” He divulges, “I was born and raised in a country that tolerates Negrophobic utterances and where a Caucasian beauty ideal survives in public discourse” and recalls how as a teenager his mother tried to console him when he couldn’t style his hair in whatever fashion was popular at the time. His mother, associating his frustration with his “bad” hair, assured him his hair would “improve” as he grew older (5). Even as an adult, Torres-Saillant recalled listening to a daytime television program during a visit to the island in 2004 where the host promised to share beauty tips for viewers that would help them make their noses thinner. While his first reaction was an understandable anger, he then reminded himself that “the young woman was probably repeating aesthetic values that still thrive in the Dominican Republic’s beauty industry” (7).

The aesthetic value of whiteness reaches through all levels of Dominican society, and as Howard points out, even the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo<sup>28</sup> “resorted to

---

<sup>28</sup> Rafael Leónidas Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 to his assassination in 1961 and his reign is considered one of the bloodiest, most tumultuous periods in Dominican (and American) history. Not only is Trujillo held responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, but he also required ordinary Dominican citizens to keep his portrait hanging in their homes and he erected many monuments to himself throughout the country. Julia Alvarez’s 1995 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is an excellent account of both the struggles of daily life in the *Trujillato* and the resistance movement against his regime, as told through the story of the Mirabal sisters, famous *Dominicana* revolutionaries and revered national figures.

lightening his skin with cosmetic powders” to disguise his own African heritage (9). Trujillo’s whitening activities extended well beyond his own face, however, as during his regime *antihaitianismo* moved beyond the realm of idea into a state-sponsored ideology that Sagás argues was essential for the survival and success of Trujillo’s political regime (45). Trujillo capitalized on existing anti-Haitian sentiments and used the neighbor to the west to incite fear and fidelity in Dominican citizens. He convinced the average citizen that only he had the power to protect them from “the ‘Africanization’ of the country and the ‘Ethiopian’ hordes of Haitian immigrants” (Sagás 65). And, much like poor whites in the southern United States were convinced to view their color as a privilege, so much so that it would keep them from uniting with poor blacks against the wealthy landowners who exploited all of them, dark-skinned Dominicans could feel “racially and culturally superior” (Sagás 66) because at least they were not Haitian. In reality, the black and mulatto majority had little choice in the matter; according to Sagás they could either accept a socially sanctioned *indio* identity or choose to be ostracized from society (66).

The unfortunate reality for many dark-skinned Dominicans, however, was that even consenting to the label of *indio* was not enough to save them from the extreme cruelties of the Trujillo regime. In an effort to secure the formerly fluid border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, in October of 1937 Trujillo ordered the massacre of all Haitians living in the borderlands; because the shade of a person’s skin was often enough to get them killed, many dark-skinned Dominicans were among the estimated 20,000 to 30,000 dead.<sup>29</sup> The official justification for the massacre was the preservation

---

<sup>29</sup> The precise number of victims has never been known, but most sources estimate the number to be between 20,000 and 30,000. Some reports total as few as 18,000 victims and some as many as 35,000.

of national security, but unofficially Trujillo's intent was to commit racial genocide. He even sought to repopulate the border regions with refugees from Eastern Europe, Italy, and Japan in an effort to physically "lighten' the population" (Howard 157).

Trujillo's ideological offensive was not only targeted toward the lower classes and immigrants, however; he also used his assault of Haitian blackness to assuage the fears of the lighter Dominican elite, who had shunned him from the upper tiers of society for years before his rise to power in 1930. Although he himself had come from the lower classes, Trujillo did not significantly change the racial status quo in the country during his thirty-one year reign, and in fact worked tirelessly to uphold the privileges assigned to the white Dominican elite. As Sagás argues, Trujillo's *antihaitianismo* "defended a social-racial model in which only the light-skinned Hispanophile elites really fit," and those were not born in the elite circles, like Trujillo himself, had to "'whiten' themselves (at least culturally) or were alienated and excluded from the national prototype" (66). In essence, Trujillo was personally beholden to the same cultural whitening he promoted in his regime's policies.

Cultural myths of the Dominican Republic as a white, Hispanic nation have survived well beyond Trujillo's assassination in 1961. For example, current Dominican textbooks often highlight the Indian and Spanish elements of Dominican heritage while at the same time emphasizing a history of aggression by Haitians (Sagás 74, 76). Sheridan Wigginton's 2005 study on the representation of blackness in Dominican social science textbooks concluded that blackness is represented to Dominican school children through negative and exaggerated stereotypes and a less desirable social status; it is also portrayed

as something that can be corrected through “generational ‘blancamiento’” or whitening (210). These influences lead Dominican children to “grow up, first, despising and discriminating against Haitians for their past atrocities, second perceiving themselves as light-skinned Hispanics vis-à-vis the Haitian black, and third, rejecting blackness as alien and barbaric” (Sagás 76). They also lend credibility to the *antihaitianismo* ideologies children see every day in popular culture.

The inherent Dominican prejudice against blackness (i.e. Haitians) also played a notable role in the 1994 and 1996 presidential elections as a political weapon against Dr. José Francisco Peña Gómez, a man considered to be “a pure black; that is, he had dark skin and no ‘fine’ features” (Sagás 107). While Peña Gómez had widespread popular support, his campaign ultimately could not hold up against the unyielding attacks on his presumed national origins from his opponents, Trujillo successor Joaquín Balaguer in 1994 and Leonel Fernández in 1996. Although he was born in the Dominican Republic, the campaigns of both Balaguer and Fernández accused Peña Gómez of having Haitian origins, and therefore sympathies. His loyalty to the Dominican Republic was constantly questioned, and rumors were rampant that he was not only in league with Haiti but sought his own personal revenge for Trujillo’s 1937 massacre that presumably killed his parents and left him an orphan. Visual representations of Peña Gómez exaggerated his physical features, emphasizing large lips and dark skin in an effort to associate him with Africanness. The attacks worked, much to the disappointment of Peña Gómez, who lamented the fact that racism should play such a large role in his defeat, despite the overwhelming mixed-race electorate (Howard 181).

While it is obvious that racism in the Dominican Republic is largely directed towards Haitians and darker-skinned Dominicans, the well-developed *system* of pigmentocracy that exists on the island does not transfer with Dominicans who immigrate to the United States and are confronted with a more binary construction of race (although Dominicans' conception of race as a color-continuum may not immediately change). In their study of racial self-identification among Dominican immigrants, José Itzigsohn, Silvia Giorguli and Obed Vazquez argue that

Upon migration to the United States, Dominicans confront a racial classification system that categorizes many of them as black, and almost all of them as non-white, and that includes them in the panethnic category Hispanic or latino/a [sic]—an American category of identity and classification. (51)

The designation *indio*, therefore, means very little in North America and many Dominican immigrants must not only reevaluate their own racial identities, but they must often confront the damaging racial constructions that exist at home on the island. In their work *The Dominican Americans*, Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández see this as a positive result of immigration:

When Dominicans come to the United States...they escape the ideological artillery that sustains negrophobic thought in the homeland, and they have a greater possibility of coming to terms with their real ethnicity...Dominicans become accustomed to speaking of themselves as “people of color” and ally themselves with the other peoples of color in the struggle for survival. (143-144)

Still, an alliance with people of color in the United States does not necessarily erase centuries of beliefs and experiences. As Howard argues, when immigrants return to the homeland, their racial identity “is not only re-established when back in Dominican

society, but arguably remains intact and active whilst outside the Dominican Republic” (107).

Despite the frequent arguments that Dominicans at best are ignorant of their “true” racial identity or at worst willingly deny it, Torres-Saillant brings the argument back to the realm of history. He posits:

One could argue that for Dominicans of African descent history had conspired against their development of a racial consciousness that would inform their building of alliances along ethnic lines. At the same time, their deracialized consciousness precluded the development of a discourse of black affirmation that would serve to counterbalance intellectual negrophobia. (“Tribulations,” 1096)

Additionally, because of the variety of racial descriptors in the Dominican lexicon, Dominicans do not give the same weight to a discourse of blackness that those who are from a racially polarized society might. Therefore, “Nothing in their history indicates to the masses of the Dominican people that their precarious material conditions or the overall indignities they suffer constitute a strictly racial form of oppression” (Torres-Saillant, “Tribulations,” 1090). One might easily conclude, then, that a subversive discourse that challenges damaging racial assumptions is not needed in the Dominican Republic in the *same* way it was (and still is) needed in places like the United States, where even now the “one-drop” mentality determines one’s race, and to a large extent one’s social circumstances. This is not to say, however, that there is no need for an honest examination of how race functions within Dominican literature.

Regardless of the historical circumstances that have shaped the Dominican understanding of blackness, or maybe even because of them, discussions of race and

nationality and attention to shades of skin and phenotypic features play a large role in contemporary fiction written by Dominican and Dominican-American authors. Indeed, Stinchcomb argues that “Black characters, ‘black talk,’ black oppression, and black history abound in the literature, despite the nation’s efforts to deny any relation to Africa or Africans” (110). While race itself is not often a primary trope in the work of well-known authors Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz, it is impossible to ignore how a consideration of shades of color and the complex association of race and nationality figure into their work. Fiction by lesser-known authors Nelly Rosario, Angie Cruz, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Annecy Báez also present shades of skin as integral to their narratives, and unlike much of the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these authors are not afraid to view their work within the larger framework of the African Diaspora.<sup>30</sup> The national obsession with shades of skin and “fine” or “bad” features presents itself as a significant undercurrent within the work of these authors, whether they are writing grand tales of national history or focused examinations of family dramas.

### **History and the Development of a National Character**

In her book *The Development of Literary Blackness in the Dominican Republic*, Stinchcomb makes the argument that nineteenth-century Dominican literature shared a concern common with the literatures of many Latin American nations: to establish a national identity and a secure sense of independence through the written word. Unlike

---

<sup>30</sup> While I focus on contemporary literature in my study, Stinchcomb offers a compelling discussion of the ways that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dominican writers participated in the rhetorical erasure of the African component of Dominican identity and hence were able to “whiten” the population by changing “the way the ‘black’ majority viewed itself” (37).

the products from other Spanish colonies, however, Dominican literature sought not to distance the country from its Spanish father, but rather to free itself from “any association with its black history, or more specifically, the presence of black Africans in the Dominican Republic” (18). The political and ideological erasure of the African component in Dominican heritage further made “any expression of blackness in literature a mere impossibility” (37). In the twenty-first century, however, contemporary Dominican writers Alvarez and Rosario are not bound by cultural norms to erase and ignore the significance of the Africanist presence in Dominican history; rather, their period novels *In the Name of Salomé* and *Song of the Water Saints* may look back on historical events from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries and both celebrate and critique the role that blackness plays in an understanding of national character.

Alvarez’s 2000 novel *In the Name of Salomé* imagines the lives of famed Dominicana poet Salomé Ureña and her daughter Camila Henríquez Ureña. Salomé, born in Santo Domingo in 1850, was an active poet from around 1867 to her death in 1897, and has been called by some “the country’s first great woman poet” (Hoetink, *The Dominican People*, 159). Like many of her contemporaries, Salomé’s poetry took an interest in “the customs and language of the people themselves” and “a faith...in progress, in the possibility of improving the society of the future” (Hoetink, *The Dominican People*, 159). As mentioned earlier, Dominican literature at this time played an integral role in developing a national consciousness and affirming cultural independence. The fledgling country had only declared its independence from Haiti six years before Salomé’s birth and although free from Haitian control during her lifetime,

the Dominican Republic was annexed to Spain for most of her childhood and did not gain true independence until the end of the War of Restoration in 1865 (Moya Pons 218).

There is no doubt that Salomé's poetic concern with homeland and progress gained her national fame and respect; what is worthy of note in Alvarez's re-telling of Salomé's story, however, is the role that race and color play in both Salomé's conception of herself and in Camila's remembrances of her mother's and her own story.

From the very beginning of her narrative, Alvarez correlates Salomé's life with that of the Dominican Republic: "The story of my life starts with the story of my country" (13). As indicated earlier, the "story" of the Dominican Republic was forged largely in opposition to Haiti through the radical erasure of an African heritage, but what is telling about Alvarez's Salomé is that she does not fail to see her own blackness but rather is cognizant of it. From a very young age she was aware of her genealogy and in a recollection of her paternal grandparents' reaction to her mother states, "had there been time to discuss the matter...they might have pointed out that though Gregoria herself was pale enough, and though she spoke of her grandpapá from the Canary Islands, all you had to do was look over her shoulder at her grandmother and draw your own conclusions" (19). Indeed, her father's family makes a point to remark that Salomé and her sister Ramona "look like our other grandmother" (23), the one who presumably has visible African origins.<sup>31</sup> While the Ureña family might openly prefer lighter skin and subtly criticize Salomé and Ramona for being dark, Salomé's father Nicolás does not try to ignore their heritage in the same way his family might. Through his reaction upon

---

<sup>31</sup> Alvarez is surely aware here of the Puerto Rican saying "*¿y tu abuela, adonde está?*" which refers to the certainty that most Puerto Ricans have a grandmother of African descent somewhere in their lineage. See pg. 104 in Part Two for a fuller discussion of this saying.

hearing of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, we learn that Salomé's family "liked the bearded president of our neighbors to the north. He had struggled for the freedom of people of our color" (49). This indicates that there was at least some understanding within the family that the Ureñas were people of color and had some connection to the slaves in the United States, and subsequently a connection to Africa.

Given her early comprehension of both her own color and the value attached to lighter skin, it is not surprising that upon gaining fame as a poet Salomé became quite self-conscious of her own appearance. While getting used to the stares of passing admirers, she remarks, "I studied my face in the mirror: the same eyes, mouth, big ears (oh, how I hated them!), the nose I wished were a little less broad, the springy hair I couldn't tamp down" (87). She can clearly see her African heritage in her features and is surprised and a little disconcerted when "people who just a few months ago would not have said good day to me on the street suddenly smile with deference" (87). Likewise, when she first meets the man who will become her husband, Federico Henríquez y Carvajal, she sees in his reaction to her the somewhat blinded look of an admirer. She assumes, "He was not seeing me, Salomé, of the funny nose and big ears with hunger in her eyes and Africa in her skin and hair" (94). In her case, national fame and the respect of the Dominican intelligentsia may have been enough to erase her heritage for the son of a wealthy Jewish family.

If Salomé's origins did not at first act as a hindrance to Pancho's (as Federico was familiarly called) interest, they became an issue in the salons of elite Santo Domingo society, where Salomé stood out for reasons other than her fame. She remarks that she

and her sister were unacquainted with the “art of circulating from one polite conversation to another” and “[i]n our plain, dark gowns, the two of us, in our late twenties with some color to our skin, must have looked like somebody’s chaperones” (129). When Pancho proposes marriage to Salomé, her mother encourages her to accept his proposal, but warns her of the social storms to come, not because Pancho is so much younger than Salomé, but rather because “he is white and we are mixed” (137). If the custom was to “marry white,” especially for elite families like the Henríquezs, then Salomé’s mother was certainly aware of the risk that Pancho was taking in marrying her daughter.

Although it may have seemed to Salomé that Pancho was marrying her as an individual, in many ways he was marrying her as a national figure, and from the early days of their marriage he not only sought to shape her poetry, but he played a significant role in determining her public persona as well. In a portrait of Salomé he had commissioned after her death, Pancho instructs the artist to lighten her complexion and reshape her features into “a pretty, aquiline nose and rosebud mouth” (280), a fact that is pointed out by Camila’s stepmother Tivisita. The revision is not lost on Ramona, either, when she evaluates the painting for Camila: “Her aunt is studying the portrait, shaking her head. ‘Your mother was much darker, for one thing’” (281). Camila is visibly annoyed by this revelation, in part because it shatters the myth she has created about her mother but also because it further divides her from her father and his new family with Tivisita: “Even though she herself is quite light-skinned, next to the pale Tivisita and the new brood, Camila looks like one of the servant girls” (281). What is significant about these passages is not only that they reveal how Pancho attempted to overhaul his first

wife through changing her skin color and features in a portrait, but that he chose a very light-skinned woman for his second wife. One of Pancho and Tivisita's children, in fact, has a "striking, indigenous look" (290) that the family attributes to his Taíno name, Cotubanamá. With his second family, then, Pancho pays homage to both his European and indigenous roots while simultaneously erasing the African roots of his first family.

As an adult, Camila comes to terms with this portrait of her mother and she explains to her student assistant Nancy that while the portrait is intended to be Salomé, it is really her father's creation: "He wanted my mother to look like the legend *he* was creating,' Camila adds. 'He wanted her to be prettier, whiter...'" (44). In this sense, Pancho's actions can be understood as reflecting the revisionist moves of the Dominican Republic in general. If the nation were to have a heroine, a poet to shape the national consciousness, then that person could not have an African heritage. If the legend of Salomé were to survive, it needed to be rewritten to fit into acceptable cultural modes. Indeed, as Camila reflects, "Everyone in the family—yes, including Mon!—touched up the legend of her mother" (44).

Camila herself participates in the illusion of her mother's (and her own) race, however, when she is confronted with Nancy's surprised reaction that Camila's mother was a "negro." Camila corrects her by saying, "We call it mulatto. She was a mixture" (44). While this would make perfect sense in the Dominican Republic, it would certainly mean very little to a white American girl in 1960s New York State. In this sense, Camila is complicit with Dominican constructions of race that differentiate between "pure" and "mixed-race" individuals, despite her own experiences with racism in the United States.

For example, while living in Minneapolis on the eve of World War I, Camila and her brother Pedro are questioned by the local branch of the Boy Spies of America because of Pedro's particularly dark skin and Camila's heavy accent (233). And, while in Washington D.C. with her father in the early 1920s, Camila's budding romance with a white marine named Major Scott Andrews is plagued both by overt acts of racism and her fears of her race being "found out." When Pedro asks if Major Andrews knows about their mother, he is really asking if he knows about their mother's race. Although Camila is fairly light-skinned and could "pass" for white, the darker Pedro quips, "When he meets me, he will know right away" (201). Indeed, the Henríquez family is turned away when the major tries to take them to a café: "The establishment would not serve us. They said they did not have enough room for such a large party, but there were many empty tables, and we all guessed the reason" (204). Camila is mortified, especially after she had witnessed segregation firsthand when Major Andrews took her to a jazz club and "the only apparently colored people in the room are up on the stage, and no one would guess that Camila, pale-skinned with her wavy, marcelled hair, is one of them" (198). She reflects on how the musicians had to come in a separate door and eat outside, but more significantly, how they could have been her brothers because of their appearance (201).

Camila's ambivalence about her race is not surprising given these experiences and her own father's problematic reaction to her mother's color and features, and it is not something that is dispelled with age. As Camila prepares to depart her home in Poughkeepsie in 1960, Alvarez describes her as "a tall, elegant woman with a soft brown color to her skin (southern Italian? a Mediterranean Jew? a light-skinned negro woman

who has been allowed to pass by virtue of her advanced degrees?)” (1) The ambiguity of her race has always given Camila pause and it hasn’t been easy to share, even with her closest friend Marion. When Camila expresses her reticence to visit Marion and her family in a “small village” in North Dakota, Marion dismisses her apprehension and replies, “Camila, hon, we don’t have villages in North America. And come on, you’re about as much of a negro as I am a German” (242). This dismissal may be easy for Marion, whose “skin is so pale that Camila’s father often worried that she might be anemic or consumptive” (5), but for Camila her race is integral to who she is and she wants Marion to recognize that. Where Camila does feel comfortable, however, is in the company of her Cuban lover Domingo, a sculptor whose skin is even darker than anyone in her family. With Domingo she can talk openly about her mother, and although she misleads herself into thinking she loves him as a man, she does reflect years later that she “had fallen in love with the artist, his intensity, Africa in his skin—the things that connected me to my mother, not him” (349).

Through Camila’s recognition of her African heritage here, Alvarez tangentially establishes the Dominican nation as part of the African Diaspora because of Salomé’s metonymical position in Dominican history. Likewise, critic Stephen Knadler argues,

In Camila’s refusal to repeat the lie about the “white body” of her mother, and the national icon, Salome [sic], Alvarez clearly speaks out against Dominican nationalists’ symbolization of female identity to stand in for the purity of Spanish descent, a symbolization that robbed women of their mixed race bodies and denied their “dark” sexuality.

Despite attempts to the contrary, Alvarez's text does not let the ideologues of Dominican identity co-opt Salomé's history, body, or heritage and instead exposes the African component of Dominican ancestry.

While Alvarez takes on the subject of a national figure in her text, Rosario explores Dominican history at the local level in her 2002 novel *Song of the Water Saints*. Ranging in time from 1916 on the island to 1999 in Washington Heights in New York City, Rosario's text chronicles the lives of four generations of Dominican women through an American occupation, a bloody dictatorship, and a mass emigration to the United States. Throughout all of these experiences, Rosario explores the sexualization and fetishization of the mulatta body; the Dominican obsession with whiteness and how this is correlated with ideas of beauty; and how an *antihaitianismo* ideology permeates the consciousness of her characters.

If it can be said that *In the Name of Salomé* critiques the robbing of the mixed-race woman's sexuality, *Song of the Water Saints* exposes the opposite issue—the fetishization of the black female body. Claudette M. Williams examines the symbolic role that both black and mulatto women have played in the literature of the Spanish Caribbean in her book *Charcoal and Cinnamon*. One of her major premises is that “As cinnamon is more appealing than charcoal, so too was the mulatto woman's perceived aesthetic and sensual attraction more esteemed than the mere utility value imputed to the black woman” (xi). Representations that reduce the mulatta to an aesthetic and sexual commodity, however, gloss over the problematic history of miscegenation itself: the mixed-race history of the Spanish Caribbean primarily developed from the pairing of

white men and black women, frequently in a master-slave relationship, and it was not often a matter of choice for the black woman. Despite the obvious power differential in these relationships, however, Williams contends that depictions of the mulatta, especially in the nineteenth century, frequently cast her as the sexually aggressive figure in whose very being the social fears and anxieties of the white elite were realized (48).

While Rosario acknowledges the white man's fetish for black women, she does not portray the woman as the aggressor, but rather exposes her position as prey and victim. Her novel opens with an italicized description of an erotic postcard, describing a naked boy and girl with copper flesh who are cradling each other in a fabricated jungle scene, replete with a drum, a stuffed tiger, and coconut trees. It is soon revealed that the players in the scene are the novel's first protagonist, Graciela, and her first husband Silvio, who are paid a few pesos to pose for an American photographer named Peter West. West is presumably traveling the globe collecting pictures of women of color for his Collector's Club series specializing in "the *exotique erotique* beauty of racial types" (64). In addition to the primitive scene he sets for Graciela and Silvio, West's collection contains images of "brothel quadroons bathed in feathers" and "a Negro chambermaid naked to the waist" (9), both of which exoticize these black female figures and cater to the fantasies of his white male clientele.

One of West's more troubling customers is Eli Cavalier, a European pervert travelling the Caribbean to indulge his taste for black women. For Eli, the black woman is not only a figure of sexual desire, but also an object of study. Through his travels he has "invented a means for improving and intensifying the exotic exhalations of the

Negress,” which includes rubbing down her body with lavender and thyme after a salt bath, a process he records in a notebook he carries with him and hopes to publish in a pamphlet (67). It is almost as if Eli reduces these women to hunks of beef and is recording the most savory ways to prepare them. Indeed, when he first encounters Graciela on a train to Santiago, he describes her thusly: “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 dive his hardness into velvet blackness” (67). In Eli’s eyes, Graciela is reduced to her parts in order to satisfy his troubling sexual appetite.

When they arrive in Santiago, Eli takes Graciela to a brothel where he can indulge his degenerate desires and it is interesting to note that at first the proprietor, La Pola, did not want to admit her because of her dark appearance. La Pola surmises that Graciela “would not command as high a price as the fairer girls. But the naps under that scarf appealed to foreigners like this one” (74). She had inherited her business over the generations from her great-great-great-grandmother’s owner, Quirós, who “made money from his three obsessions: money, sex, and mixed-bloods. Said blood-mixing spit out better fruit than the original” (74-75). La Pola, then, capitalizes on the sexualization of the mulatta, but she also relies on the utility of the black woman as demonstrated through the servant who brings Graciela the tub for her bath. Graciela notes that in this woman’s speech she “could hear the same Haiti she would hear in the vendor’s talk in the market”

(77). A clear association can be made between this woman's Haitian origins and her status as a domestic rather than sexual worker.

Although Graciela is viewed as a sexual object whilst in the company of Eli at the brothel, when she makes her escape to the home of the wealthy (and white) Ana and Humberto Álavaro outside of Santiago, she is relegated to the same utilitarian role occupied by the Haitian washer woman, as Humberto finds her "too ugly for funnin' with" (94). Ana and Humberto's marriage is not a happy one, but rather an arranged union between two closely related families for the purpose of "keeping not only the fresh, new money within the families, but also the Spanish blood of cousins" (88). While it is common practice in the Spanish Caribbean for elite families to closely guard the perceived purity of their bloodlines, the marriage of Ana and Humberto also exemplifies the cliché of the virtuous white wife being passed over sexually by her husband, as Ana reveals to Graciela Humberto's tendency to sleep with their black servants. Williams argues, "It is the system of power relations that confers freedom, virtue, and beauty on the white woman and that guarantees her a place, while placing restrictions on the *mulata* because of her black taint" (104), but in Ana's case it relegates her to a state of deep sadness wherein Graciela learns "that comfort alone (or the privilege of white skin) did not guarantee eternal gaiety" (Rosario 91).

Ana's happiness, then, is restricted to reminiscences of her wedding day which are prompted by a photo she shares with Graciela. Graciela is struck at how white Ana and Humberto's teeth are, and Ana reveals that she asked the photographer to not only touch up their teeth, but to "lighten up Humberto a bit" (89). The lightened version of

Humberto, then, becomes an integral part of Ana's fictitious invention of their marriage, just as Pancho's lightened version of Salomé became a legendary substitute for the reality of her origins. The legend of the Álvaro wedding picture does not begin and end with Ana, however, as Graciela takes it with her when she leaves Santiago to return to her family near the capitol. Graciela's daughter Mercedes finds the photo and it becomes part of her own legend; after being told that Casimiro, the man who raised her, is not her real father, Mercedes mistakenly believes that the man in the photograph is her real father, Silvio, and that she descends from "royal white blood" (162). It is a fiction she carries with her all of her life, even telling her granddaughter Leila in 1998 that Graciela had her "with a fine man of the purest breed" (209).

Mercedes' presumption of whiteness corresponds with Williams' claim that in a nation with a populace that seeks to identify with its European rather than its African origins, "the black female forebear becomes a negative symbol—the embodiment of the shameful half of their racial heritage" (95). Indeed, Mercedes' relationship with Graciela is a tenuous one at best, due in part to Graciela's consistent neglect and occasional abandonment, but also because of Mercedes' erroneous fantasy that her mother had taken her away from a better life with a white father. Upon Graciela's death in 1930 from syphilis (which she had contracted from Eli years earlier), Mercedes at first tries to control her own emotions about the event and alter the appearance of her mother's corpse by whitening it; she covers Graciela's skin with a thick pancake foundation and places a straight-hair wig on her head, in effect erasing both her blackness and her "bad" features. In an emotional release of the "white-hot rage she had suppressed," however, Mercedes

beats on her mother's chest until it caves in, finally letting loose the years of anger and hatred she had let bottle up within her (177).

While Mercedes' mistaken notion of her origins may explain much of the anger and entitlement she exhibits throughout the novel, it only partially explains her deplorable behavior towards Haitians. During the 1921 *Carnaval* celebration to commemorate Dominican independence from Haiti, Graciela must physically stop Mercedes from bludgeoning one of the other children who had come to the festival in traditional blackface. With several other children looking on and chanting "¡Beat the Haitian, beat the Haitian!" (103), Graciela must endure the rebuke of the child's mother who exclaims, "¡If anything, I should be the one beating your black ass!" (104) Furthermore, after Trujillo's 1937 massacre, Mercedes dismisses the severity of the event, arguing, "But the Haitians have been polluting us with their language, their superstitions, their sweat, for too long" (181).<sup>32</sup> For Mercedes, the root of her *antihaitianismo* may be traced to the owner of the local kiosk who had taken her under his wing when she was very young, a Syrian immigrant named Mustafá. After expelling a young Haitian boy who was begging for food at his door, Mustafá turned to Mercedes and explained that "Haitians could not be trusted" and they were responsible for destroying "the fabric of the country by expelling its best white families." Most significantly, though, Mustafá told Mercedes "never to behave or compare herself to people like that little boy, never to act so hungry, so slave-minded, so indolent, so black..." (107) Ironically, Mustafá himself becomes a victim of the anti-Haitian massacre

---

<sup>32</sup> Mercedes' justification of her attitude towards Haitians here aligns with the official rhetoric of the Trujillo regime that argued their actions against Haitians on the border were necessary to protect the sovereignty of the nation.

when he finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, unable to correctly pronounce *perejil*, the Spanish word for “parsley”; this was the Trujillo regime’s rudimentary test to distinguish Haitians from dark-skinned Dominicans.<sup>33</sup>

Trujillo’s massacre is not the only significant historical event Rosario alludes to. The novel begins in 1916, the first year of an eight year American military occupation. In effect, the country during these years was run by the U.S. Department of the Navy who “believed itself seriously committed to a long-term mission to correct the economic, political, and social life of the country according to the U.S. Navy’s conception of a more stable order” (Moya Pons 322). Rosario, however, portrays the occupation as a time of great fear and frustration for Dominicans who were forced to tread softly around the “*yanqui*” soldiers. In a display of power, in fact, one soldier pinches Graciela’s nostrils together until her nose bleeds, at which point he exclaims, “Now you’ve got my aquiline nose” (15). A legacy of racially-charged violence is not all the *yanqui* soldiers left, though; as Rosario declares, “The troops also left a trail of deaths and births: mourning mothers and mothers with fair-haired children” (123). Again, the domination of the black female body that was so prevalent during slavery is repeated during this time of occupation.

An additional consequence of the American presence is that it left the country ripe for the advent of Trujillo in the aftermath of decades of subjugation from foreign powers.

---

<sup>33</sup> The 1937 massacre is sometimes referred to as the “Parsley Massacre” because of this linguistic test. The assumption of the Trujillo regime was that only native Spanish speakers (i.e. true Dominicans) could correctly pronounce the word “perejil”; the Haitian Creole word for “parsley” is “pèsi” and the French word is “persil.” Those who could not pass this test were assumed to be Haitians and therefore killed. The 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* by Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat is an excellent fictional depiction of the massacre from the perspective of Haitians living in the disputed border territory, many of whom had lived for generations on what was considered Dominican soil.

Trujillo himself rose through the ranks of the Dominican National Guard, a body of native troops created by the United States to quell revolutionary activities (Moya Pons 323). In Rosario's work, Silvio is recruited by the Guard, which he views as "an accomplishment...for a man as dark and illiterate as he to be entrusted with yanqui guns" (19). The military, in fact, offered significant opportunities for the advancement of the darker lower classes through the racialized social strata in the Dominican Republic, although Silvio abandons the Guard when he is forced to murder a friend who takes the shoes of a "shrimp-skinned Marine" (20).

Decades later, Rosario's family chronicle concludes in the United States after a mass migration of Dominicans in the 1980s takes Mercedes, her husband Andrés, and their son Ismael and granddaughter Leila to Washington Heights, a largely Dominican enclave in New York City. Definitely a product of her culture, Mercedes is appalled by what she interprets as "the deterioration of Dominicans living abroad," especially the youth, who've "forgotten Spanish and stopped combing their hair and become Negros who bop their heads to that awful awful music" (218). Mercedes' concerns point to the larger cultural issues Dominican immigrants must face, which are taken up in greater depth by an additional work by Alvarez and works by Díaz and Cruz.

### **The Immigrant Experience**

Alvarez's 1991 novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Díaz's 1996 short story collection *Drown*, and Cruz's 2005 novel *Let it Rain Coffee* all follow the immigration journeys of Dominican families from the island to the United States. The

imprints of Trujillo's racist ideology and its relation to Dominican class structures as well as traces of both racism and colorism can be seen throughout these works, but each approaches questions of race and class in different ways. Alvarez's novel recounts the experiences of the upper-class García de la Torre girls, both at their family compound in the Dominican Republic and on their upwardly mobile journey to become Americans when they move to the United States as political exiles. Both Diaz's and Cruz's work follows lower-class Dominican families from their communities in the Dominican Republic to various barrios in New York and New Jersey. Each text reflects and represents the dominant attitudes towards race and skin color that exist in the Dominican Republic, but they also explore how Dominican conceptions of race become problematized in the United States, where attitudes towards immigrants are often hostile, regardless of class or skin color.

The lives of the García girls in the Dominican Republic are marked by wealth and privilege, and although the adults in the family are not supporters of Trujillo, their lives and attitudes still reflect prevailing Dominican attitudes towards race and class. For example, when Laura García de la Torre, the *mami* of the García girls, is interrogated by the *guardia* as to the whereabouts of her husband, she immediately resorts to the grand manners of her class in order to disarm the policemen, who "deep down...are still boys in rags bringing down coconuts for *el patrón* when he visits his *fincas* with his family on Sundays" (202). And, when the García family finds a window of opportunity to seek political asylum in the United States and must leave their homeland, Laura

...thinks of her ancestors, those fair-skinned Conquistadores arriving in this new world, not knowing that the gold they sought was this blazing

light. And look what they started, Laura thinks, looking up and seeing gold flash in the mouth of one of the *guardias* as it spreads open in a scared smile. (212)

Despite the political trouble her family is in, Laura is constantly aware that she descended from fair-skinned Spaniards and she also frequently refers to her Swedish grandmother, all in a conscious or unconscious attempt to differentiate herself from Trujillo's *guardia*, who like Trujillo himself are most often men from the lower classes who have climbed the social ranks in Trujillo's regime.

While Laura's assertion of the privileges of her race and class in the presence of the *guardia* is an overt demonstration of her power, the novel is also full of several covert assertions of white racial privilege, especially in reference to the dark-skinned servants employed at the de la Torre family compound. Gladys the pantry maid is described as a country girl who wears her "kinky hair in rollers all week long, then comb[s] it out for Sunday mass in hairdos copied from American magazines" (258). Laura calls Nivea the laundry maid "black-black," doubling the words in order to "darken the color to full, matching strength," although Nivea is nicknamed for the "American face cream her mother used to rub on her, hoping the milky white applications would lighten her baby's skin" (260). Both Gladys and Nivea are victims of the distorted Dominican notions of beauty referred to earlier in this section, which incline lower-class Dominicans to "whiten" themselves. In this case, Nivea's mother attempts to whiten her skin with the cream while Gladys attends to her "bad" hair by straightening out the kinks. But as Dominicans, both Gladys and Nivea can at least feel superior over Haitian Chucha, the family's oldest servant, who was taken in by Laura's father on the night of the 1937

massacre. Chucha is disliked by the other maids “because they all thought she was kind of below them, being so black and Haitian and all” (219). This again supports the argument made by Sagás that the very notion of national identity was a tool used by dark-skinned Dominicans to wield superiority over Haitians (66). Although Gladys, Nivea and Chucha all belong to the same class and have similar skin colors, Gladys and Nivea can use their Dominicanness as currency in a culture that defines racial superiority not only by color but by nationality as well.

Similarly, in Díaz’s story “Aguantando,” which takes place in the Dominican Republic, Yuniór<sup>34</sup> accedes that his family is poor and that “The only way we could have been poorer was to have lived in the campo or to have been Haitian immigrants, and Mami regularly offered these to us as brutal consolation” (70). However, Yuniór himself has dark skin and Haitian features, and his brother Rafa uses these characteristics to insult him. Most of his insults “had to do with my complexion, my hair, the size of my lips. It’s the Haitian, he’d say to his buddies. Hey Señor Haitian, Mami found you on the border and only took you in because she felt sorry for *you*” (5). Indeed, Yuniór’s complexion and features are as much a marker of his class as Laura’s Swedish grandmother is a marker of hers. Yuniór’s father leaves his family in poverty in the Dominican Republic while he tries to make a better life for them in the United States, and although Yuniór’s *mami* does the best she can, she often must rely on an intricate web of *tías* and *madrinas*<sup>35</sup> to take care of her sons when she can’t make ends meet.

---

<sup>34</sup> Yuniór is a recurring character in much of Díaz’s work and can be seen in part as the narrative voice of the author himself.

<sup>35</sup> “Aunts” and “godmothers,” respectively.

Unlike the characters in *García Girls* and *Drown*, however, Cruz establishes an affinity between Haitians and Dominicans in *Let it Rain Coffee*, especially in the years immediately following the assassination of Trujillo. According to Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons, the end of the Trujillo regime “awakened the country’s political and social energies and opened an intensive process of political democratization” (381), fictionalized in Cruz’s novel through the characters of Don Chan Colón and Miraluz and their revolutionary group the Invisible Ones. When their local community of Los Llanos receives a visit from the presidential candidate Juan Bosch, Don Chan and Miraluz are at odds over whether or not to support him. For Miraluz, she can’t “trust a man whose hands looked like alabaster” (62), but Don Chan is impressed by Bosch’s progressive ideas and his denunciation of “the Dominican rich who wore their Spanish ancestry like their true bandera” (62). Miraluz, however, is not convinced and insists they need a leader who does not come from the upper classes, like Bosch, but rather “someone like us, who knows what it’s like to be poor...Someone like Toussaint” (63). Toussaint L’overture, of course, was a leader in the Haitian revolution, and when Miraluz invokes his name the listening crowd pipes up, “You want us to end up like Haiti?...Forget the Haitians” (63). Miraluz then reminds them that “Many of us have Haiti in our blood,” but Don Chan counters with a reminder that Trujillo himself had a Haitian ancestry, which did not stop him from ordering the massacre in 1937 (63).

Although Don Chan himself may not have had Haitian origins, his adopted father, Don José, did. Don José found Chan as a boy when he had washed up on the shore of Juan Dolio, and he would tell Chan stories of “the adventures of Martí, in Cuba” and “the

Haitian revolution that Don José carried in his blood” (97), instilling in the boy a revolutionary spirit. Presumably, Chan was part of a wave of Chinese immigrants who arrived on the island during the 1916-1924 American occupation, but he had become separated from his family in a shipwreck. Ironically, as Edith Wen-Chu Chen argues, Chinese Dominicans may be “regarded as a physically and culturally distinct ethnic group, but [they] have been accepted as Dominicans” (23), unlike Haitian immigrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent. Indeed, Chen points out that while official immigration policies were originally limited to white people of European origins,<sup>36</sup> the Trujillo regime eased these restrictions to include Asians, presumably to further the whitening of *la raza dominicana* and “to minimize the Africanness of their country” (27). Even today, Chinese Dominicans enjoy some privileges that many of their darker-skinned countrymen with more distinct African features may not, including entry into elite nightclubs (Chen 28).

As a revolutionary, Don Chan exploited his Chinese appearance to gain entry to the presidential palace during Trujillo’s reign. Prompted by a dare to steal something from the palace, Don Chan headed to the capitol in a borrowed suit carrying a briefcase and was able to walk right in to the palace without being questioned by the numerous guards. His ease of entry troubled him but in his later retelling of the story he assumed

---

<sup>36</sup> An interesting case of the Trujillo regime promoting white immigration involves the Dominican Republic promising visas for thousands of Jewish refugees during World War II, although eventually only around 700 European Jews came to settle in the village of Sosúa in the north of the country. While on the surface Trujillo’s efforts to save Jews from the Holocaust might seem noble, according to Allen Wells in his book *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa*, “Trujillo had more on his mind than rescuing Jews. Colonization, immigration, and the ‘Dominicanization’ of the nation’s ill-defined border with Haiti were complementary strategies designed to foster self-sufficiency in agriculture, entice white immigrants, and bolster the population base along the western frontier in the hope of creating a buffer against future Haitian migration” (11). Trujillo’s primary purposes, then, were both to improve his deplorable public image around the world and to increase the white population of the country, despite his own anti-Semitic leanings. While most of the refugees have since moved away from the Dominican Republic, there is now a small museum in Sosúa commemorating their experiences and the impact they had on the local community, especially in the dairy industry.

the guards thought he was “the president of Japan,” “the ambassador of China,” or “the owner of Mitsubishi” (39). Although his purpose was ostensibly to convince the people of Los Llanos that Trujillo “could die like any other man” and “if they lived in fear, they would never be free” (40), from a different perspective his stunt merely emphasized the privilege afforded to those who did not carry Africa in their veins. While he could pass as an Asian diplomat, none of his fellow townspeople could do the same, and the incident would have turned out very differently if any of them had attempted it.

Chen makes the argument that “Chinese Dominicans may be able to contest traditional racial notions of Dominicanness through culture, language, and citizenship” (31), which is indeed something Don Chan has done, although the same cannot be said for many Haitian Dominicans, even after generations of living in the Dominican Republic. And yet, the concept of a Chinese Dominican is novel to many Americans, as demonstrated by the confused reaction of the immigration agent who handles Don Chan’s entry to the United States. After the death of his wife Doña Caridad, Don Chan travels to the U.S. to join his son Santo’s family who had immigrated years earlier, and he must face the reality that no one in the customs line “could explain to the officer who he was” (7).

The García family, too, must adjust to a different existence in the United States where their pampered life in the de la Torre family compound is far behind them. Despite their upper class origins, when they move to the United States they face socioeconomic and racial challenges similar to those of the lower class families in Cruz’s and Díaz’s work. Forced to rely on the kindness of American friends, the García family has to

endure years of barely making ends meet before Dr. García, the girls' *papi*, can resume his medical practice and begin to elevate the family back to their previous economic situation. Also, because of their status as Dominican immigrants, the Garcías experience racism for the first time. The entire family is called "spics"<sup>37</sup> by their disgruntled downstairs neighbor who they have dubbed *La Bruja*.<sup>38</sup> Carla, the oldest daughter, is taunted by her white classmates who make fun of her accent and tell her to "Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!" (153) And Yolanda, the third daughter, has to confront the sexual stereotypes of her first college boyfriend, Rudy Elmenhurst, who exclaims, "I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all that Catholic bullshit, you'd be really free..But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan" (99).

While the García girls initially suffer because of the racial and cultural ostracizing they're not used to, Yunior's previous experiences of discrimination in the Dominican Republic seem to have prepared him for life in the United States as a minority citizen, and rather than suffer he seems to thrive, especially in his sexual relationships. Díaz's story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" outlines Yunior's different strategies for successfully dating or seducing girls from any race, and it piquantly addresses both his own racial stereotypes and those of the girls he dates, especially the white girls. He claims that "the white ones are the ones you want the most" (145) and "if she's a whitegirl you know you'll at least get a hand job" (144). And if

---

<sup>37</sup> "Spic" is a common derogatory term used against native Spanish speakers, ostensibly making fun of the way someone with a Spanish accent would pronounce the English word "speak": without a hard "e."

<sup>38</sup> "La Bruja" means "the witch" in Spanish and is generally a pejorative term.

she's white, "tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own" (147). And "She'll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you've never been to Spain, say, I like you. You'll sound smooth" (148). Dating white girls, however, goes against the barrio rules Yuniór talks about in the story "Boyfriend," where his upstairs neighbor, "one of those dark-skinned smooth-faced brothers that women kill for" likes to hit on white girls behind his Latina girlfriend's back. Yuniór used to think that the rules were "Latinos and blacks in, whites out—a place we down cats weren't supposed to go" (114), but "love teaches you" and "clears your head of any rules" (114).

In addition to his familiarity with the experience of discrimination, perhaps another reason Yuniór is initially more successful in assimilating to American culture is that because of his class, he doesn't buy into the myth that American society is color blind as easily as the García girls might. Kimberly L. Ebert argues that "despite the realities of racial inequalities, the dominant ideology of race in America is that of color blindness" (177) and that "while research maintains that Whites commonly deny white skin privilege, White identity is often constructed in opposition to other races" (184). Obviously, because of the color of his skin, Yuniór does not have the ability to construct a white identity for himself in the United States and so he is less likely to believe the myth that in America, color does not matter.

Paradoxically, however, as Howard points out, many Dominican immigrants who have a personal experience with racism are more likely to separate themselves from black or African Americans by emphasizing their ethnic (i.e. "Spanish") identity (114). In

Díaz's "How to Date," in fact, Yunió advises his reader to "Hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro" before your date comes over (143). Marisel Moreno reads this as "a metaphorical erasure of the African component of Dominican culture" (111), although it is a shallow one as Yunió demonstrates when he advises his reader to "Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa" (145). While on the one hand it is significant that Yunió recognizes his African heritage here, Moreno reads this as a reflection of "the futility of assimilationist ideals that seek to integrate racial and ethnic minorities into the white Anglo-American social fabric" (111).

In Cruz's novel, too, the Colón family tries unsuccessfully to assimilate into white American society, especially the character of Esperanza. Obsessed with the television program *Dallas* (after which she has named her daughter Dallas and her son Bobby), Esperanza imagined a United States full of large ranches with horses and beautiful homes and dresses, a far cry from the cramped Washington Heights apartment she finds herself living in. Though she may try to wear her hair like Pamela Ewing and had always imagined her husband Santo looking like "an indio version of Bobby Ewing" (168), her dream of *Dallas* is crushed when she meets Patrick Duffy, the actor who plays Bobby, on the subway in New York: "Esperanza wanted to touch his face. The skin was so pale and blotchy. Was he really the man she saw on TV? Had he ever ridden on a horse?" (249) In addition to her own life crumbling around her because of the enormous credit card debt she has incurred, Esperanza's fantasy life, too, is shattered when she realizes the scenes she had been watching for years and years were merely an illusion.

Although Esperanza's daughter Dallas was not born in the Dominican Republic like the rest of her family, she too has her own rude awakening to the politics of color in the United States through her relationship with Peter, a white boy she meets in a record store. Peter's denial of his whiteness is at first attractive to Dallas, especially when he declares that "Color is a concept that keeps us from transformation" (199). His progressive philosophies fall to the wayside, however, when he comments on the color of Dallas's breasts: "They're so brown, he said.—I love the color of your skin" (209). When she refuses to sleep with him, however, Peter quickly loses interest and the relationship ends. For Peter, Dallas is a sexual object, just as Yolanda was for Rudy Elmenhurst in Alvarez's novel, and when the woman of color refuses to submit to the white male, her value plummets.

While Yunior and the Colón family must learn to renegotiate their racial identities in the United States, the García family already self-identifies as white, and so the shock of being categorized as other-than-white adds to their already overwhelming experience of racial discrimination and isolation. Significantly, Ebert points out that in "forming their identities as Americans, many immigrants, in the process of becoming 'American' learn that to become fully American, they must distance themselves from [people of color], the epitome of anti-American status" (185). In many ways, this is what the García girls end up doing. Laura emphasizes the second daughter Sandi's "fine looks, blue eyes, [and] peaches and ice cream skin" (52) repeatedly throughout the text, but only when the family is in the United States. And Fifi, the youngest daughter, marries a blonde German man; when their light-skinned son is born, "All the grandfather's Caribbean fondness for

a male heir and for fair Nordic looks had surfaced. There was now good blood in the family against a future bad choice by one of its women” (26-27). Again, Papi’s approval of Fifi’s choice in husband reemphasizes the Dominican desire to maintain “good” blood and “marry white” mentioned earlier in this section, even though the family is no longer on the island.

Howard makes the argument that while Dominican migration to the United States has impacted Dominican conceptions of race and ethnicity, within the Dominican community abroad, “racialized terminology and perceptions of race socialized within Dominican society persist” (97). In other words, the white bias that dominates on the island does not cease to hold sway in Dominican minds abroad. One could also argue, as Torres-Saillant and Hernández do, that “American values, institutions, consumer products, and popular culture formed part of the daily diet of Dominicans long before any consideration of traveling to the United States as immigrants or visitors might have crossed their minds” (10). This is certainly true in *García Girls*, as shown when Yolanda returns to the island as an adult. Lured to the countryside by a craving for guavas, Yolanda’s car breaks down and she finds herself in the small village of Altamira where the centerpiece of the local *colmado*<sup>39</sup> is a poster for Palmolive soap. The ad for the American product presents “A creamy, blond woman luxuriat[ing] under a refreshing shower, her head thrown back in seeming ecstasy” (14-15). In this way, the Caucasian ideal of beauty that predominates on the island does not come only from Dominican elites and popular culture, but from American representations of beauty as well.

---

<sup>39</sup> A small, local convenience store.

## **Caught Between Two Cultures: The Problem of Transnationality**

In the years following the Trujillo dictatorship, the number of Dominican immigrants to the United States has increased dramatically, due in part to the expectation of improved economic opportunities abroad and as a way to escape the radical and unstable political situations that always seem to exist on the island. Howard claims that currently Dominican immigrants are second only to Mexicans in numbers arriving in the United States, both legally and illegally (98). Many of these immigrant families do not imagine they will stay in the United States permanently, but rather hold on to a dream of returning to the island one day, preferably more prosperous than they left it. For most immigrants, however, this “myth of return,” as Howard terms it (98), never becomes a reality, and as more and more Dominicans lay down roots in the United States, “the tension between ideas of assimilation and a continuing attachment to the island remains apparent” (99). This tension takes many forms but is notably manifested through Dominican conceptions of race; it is exacerbated by what has become known as the transnational community, the numbers of Dominican Americans who reside permanently in the United States but frequently travel back and forth to the island.

Díaz, in his 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and Cruz, in her 2001 novel *Soledad*, both take on the subject of transnational Dominicans and the struggles they encounter in negotiating their American and Dominican selves. These writers explore what it means to be Dominican when one’s identity is questioned both within and without the Dominican community, especially in terms of racial categorization.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the tale of the de León family, told largely through the voice of Yunior, the same character who appeared in Díaz's *Drown*. The titular character Oscar de León is an awkward, overweight, and generally unattractive young man who is obsessed with science fiction and the writing of his own fantasy opus. His older sister Lola is an attractive politically active college student with a history of rebellion against their mother, Belicia. Beli, as she is familiarly called, left the Dominican Republic shortly after the assassination of Trujillo to escape persecution from the remaining regime loyalists who targeted her because of an affair she had with the husband of Trujillo's sister. Collectively, the experiences of the de Leóns reflect the complex issues of identity formation that afflict the transnational Dominican community, especially in terms of the formation of racial identity.

Before he delves into the particular stories of the de Leóns, however, Díaz first establishes what will be a guiding trope within the novel: the "*Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (1). Significantly, the *fukú* is a hybrid curse with its origins in both the voices of the enslaved Africans brought over to the Caribbean and the native Taínos, and it was unleashed with the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola. The consequences of *fukú* are far-reaching throughout the Americas, though, as Díaz claims "we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not" (2). In effect, *fukú* results from the colonization of the New World and it includes all the negative aspects of conquest: the legacy of slavery and genocide that plagues the Americas and a resultant self-hatred among its inhabitants. Indeed, Trujillo is specifically mentioned as being closely

associated with fukú, either as its “servant or its master, its agent or its principal” (2), and no one represents self-hatred better than “a portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin” (2n), and who ordered the massacre of thousands of Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans.

The African origins of the fukú are especially meaningful for a society that denies its African heritage, and for the de León family, the fukú is largely a racial curse. Family lore attributes the origins of their curse to Beli’s father, Abelard Cabral, a prominent doctor in La Vega who unfortunately got on the bad side of Trujillo and was sentenced to 18 years in prison for slandering *el jefe*.<sup>40</sup> The first physical manifestation of the curse, however, was Beli herself who “was born black. And not just any kind of black. But black black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact” (248). Yúnior-as-narrator quips, “That’s the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child’s black complexion as an ill omen” (248), but Beli’s birth did indeed coincide with a tremendous string of bad luck for the Cabrals, ending in the deaths of both Beli’s parents and her two older (and lighter) sisters. Left an orphan by her family’s tragedy, Beli is at first given to distant relatives to raise but is soon sold to another family who make her work for them. Beli suffers extreme psychological and physical abuse with this family until her father’s cousin, La Inca, comes to save her. At first Beli’s abusers do not want to hand her over, telling La Inca, “She can’t be your family, she’s a prieta” (257). “*Prieta*” is a descriptive term for very dark, black skin, and while most of her family did not want

---

<sup>40</sup> “*El jefe*” literally means “the boss,” but in the Dominican Republic it is shorthand for Trujillo.

to claim Beli because of this feature, La Inca sees that Beli is “[d]arkskinned but clearly her family’s daughter. Of this there is no doubt” (258).

Although La Inca’s rescue of Beli no doubt saved her life, she could not protect Beli from the discrimination she would have to endure because of her dark skin. Ironically, La Inca raised Beli in Baní, “A city famed for its resistance to blackness” (78), and while she tried to provide a stable life for the girl she raised as her own daughter, Beli could not wait to escape not only the town, but also “her own despised black skin” (80). Even La Inca’s attempts to afford Beli the best education possible turned out badly, as she enrolled the girl in an upper class, and mostly white, private school. Beli’s blackness made her very conspicuous in the school, and although she would not admit it, Beli “felt utterly exposed at El Redentor, all those pale eyes gnawing at her duskiness like locusts” (83). Powerless and alone, Beli is even taunted by the Chinese immigrant Wei who calls her “*Black-black*”<sup>41</sup> (84), despite Wei’s own persecution by her classmates.

While Beli’s blackness on the one hand makes her an object of scorn in the school, it also renders her invisible to the object of her affection, Jack Pujols, “the school’s handsomest (read: whitest) boy” (89), at least until the summer Beli goes through puberty and returns to school in the fall with a fully developed, womanly body. Armed with the strength of her new-found sexuality, Beli seeks out Jack Pujols “with the great deliberation of Ahab after you-know-who” (95). By invoking *Moby Dick* here, Díaz is of course emphasizing the futility of Beli’s pursuit of the white Jack, at least in terms of the outcome Beli is seeking. While she manages to entangle Jack in a brief series of

---

<sup>41</sup> Wei’s doubling of the word “black” recalls the same practice by Laura García in Alvarez’s novel, in reference to the laundry maid Nivea (see page 64).

sexual encounters, her dreams of marrying him are crushed when they are discovered having sex in a broom closet on campus and it is revealed that he is engaged to another girl from a prominent white family in Baní. Not surprisingly, Jack blames the incident on Beli, claiming she seduced him; this touches on the idea of “the white man’s sexual anxiety” when confronted with the “sexual dominance” of the black woman, as articulated by Williams (71). As Díaz points out, however, Jack is merely repeating the behavior of his white ancestors: “The fucking of poor prietas was considered standard operating procedure for elites as long as it was kept on the do-lo, what is elsewhere called the Strom Thurmond Maneuver” (100). In the end, though, it is Beli who must suffer the most from the relationship, as she is expelled from the school.

Beli’s expulsion, while upsetting to La Inca, is liberating for Beli as it allows her to find a community where she is accepted regardless of her skin color—the night club El Hollywood. Beli’s prowess as a dancer earns her the respect of both the staff and patrons of the club, especially the “Gangster” Dionisio. Although initially Dionisio offends her by calling her a “*morena*,” which means a beautiful black girl, rather than the acceptable “*india*” (115), he eventually wins Beli’s heart by taking her to the most exclusive restaurants and clubs in Santo Domingo, “clubs that had never tolerated a nonmusician prieto inside their door before” (124). Dionisio’s power may “break the injunction against *black*” (124) in the elite establishments of the capitol, but unfortunately for Beli his power stems from his marriage to Trujillo’s sister, nicknamed “La Fea,”<sup>42</sup> who puts a hit out on Beli when she discovers the girl is pregnant with Dionisio’s child. Although Beli amazingly survives repeated attacks from La Fea’s hired goons, her baby does not, and

---

<sup>42</sup> “La Fea” literally means “the ugly woman.”

Beli must leave the Dominican Republic for New York to prevent another attack from happening.

On the flight to a new life in Nueva York, the only dream for the sixteen-year-old Beli is to find a man to support her, but as Díaz points out, what she doesn't yet know is "the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of the Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo, her own heart" (164). Despite the many hardships she endured on the island, Beli's identity is firmly rooted in her Dominican origins, but it is an identity that is difficult to pass on to her children who were born in the United States and, especially for Lola, have become acculturated into American society.

Lola is described as inheriting both her mother's voluptuous body and her dark complexion, but more significantly she has also inherited her mother's rebellious spirit, and as a teenager she runs away to the Jersey shore with a white boy named Aldo. Unlike her mother and her relationship with Jack Pujols, however, Lola was not seeking to escape her blackness through Aldo; rather, she sought to escape the strict Old World Dominican environment her mother had created for her and Oscar in the United States. Although she had tried to be the "perfect daughter," Lola felt her good behavior was not enough for her mother and so she left for what she thought would be forever. In the first weeks after she had run away, Lola looked for signs that her family was looking for her, like flyers with her picture advertising that she was a missing person. But all Lola could find were flyers for a missing cat, and she remarks, "That's white people for you. They lose a cat and it's an all-points bulletin, but we Dominicans, we lose a daughter and we might not even cancel our appointment at the salon" (66). Lola finally calls her family

herself after Aldo starts telling racist jokes and when her mother comes to get her she promptly sends her to live with La Inca in the Dominican Republic where she thinks Lola's Americanized behavior will be corrected.

What Lola finds on the island, however, is a renewed sense of identity and a comfort in her own skin that Beli never had. She starts dating a lower-class boy named Max who calls her "his morena" (73), and unlike Beli's reaction to that word, Lola finds it endearing. And, although Lola is persecuted at her Dominican school just like her mother was, the fact that she hails from the United States makes her classmates call her "gringa"<sup>43</sup> (74) rather than black-black, an interesting turn of events for the daughter of a *prieta*. When the time comes for her to return to the United States, however, Lola does not want to go and imagines running away again:

I would have lived far away. I would have been happy, I'm sure of it...I would let myself grow dark in the sun, no more hiding from it, let my hair indulge in all its kinks, and she [Beli] would have passed me on the street and never recognized me. That was the dream I had. But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. (209)

For Lola, then, the idea of freedom is not to escape from her dark skin and her kinky hair, something her mother would have thought, but rather to embrace who she is in all its complexity. At the same time, though, she can't escape into her skin any more than her mother could escape out of hers. Her reality is more intricate than that.

Like many Dominican Americans, Lola ultimately finds refuge in the communities of color that exist in the United States. Torres-Saillant claims that

---

<sup>43</sup> Originally, "gringo/a" was a term used across Latin America to describe a non-Spanish speaking white, but the term has come to more generally mean any foreign person, regardless of race.

Dominican children who are born or raised in the United States “are likely to adopt the racial classifications administered by their environment” and the longer they have lived in North America, “the greater their chances of classifying themselves as black” (“Tribulations,” 1108). This is certainly the case for Lola who includes herself in the group “we colored folks” (35) and is politically active at Rutgers University where “she was a Big Woman on Campus and knew just about everybody with any pigment” (50). It seems, then, that Lola is able to defy her family’s fukú by both acknowledging and celebrating the African component of her origins while at the same time not losing her internal sense of Dominicaness.

Oscar, on the other hand, is perpetually lost when it comes to his identity. To his white classmates at Don Bosco High School, he is merely an ugly and fat “GhettoNerd” who is the object of their abuse and scorn. Even worse, to the Dominican Diaspora community Oscar is viewed as not really Dominican because he lacks the kind of sexual prowess valued by Dominican males. And, unlike his sister, a summer trip to the Dominican Republic does not help him establish a strong sense of self but just results in his uncle commenting on the darkening of his skin by the Dominican sun: “Great...now you look Haitian” (32). The university environment, too, has little to offer Oscar. While he had hoped to find other people like himself at Rutgers,

The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy Dominicano. Dominicano soy. (49)

Left without a real community to be a part of, Oscar retreats into the world of science fiction and tries to escape his circumstances through writing his own fantasy literature.

Even as an adult Oscar is unable to leave behind the torments of his childhood. He returns to Don Bosco as a teacher only to be further teased by his students; this time, however, it is not the white kids who are taunting him but rather “the kids of color who performed the necessities” (264). Distraught with the reality that “some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change” (264), Oscar travels once more to the Dominican Republic where he falls in love with a retired prostitute, Ybón, only to be murdered by her pimp and his henchmen. In one last twist of irony, Oscar’s murderers take him to a cane field, the same place that his mother Beli had barely survived her beating years earlier. Standing in front of their loaded and aimed guns, the men tell Oscar, “Listen, we’ll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English” (322). Unable to resist one final attempt at claiming a Dominican (i.e. Spanish) identity, his call of “Fire” is the last word he utters. In his reflection on the incident, Yuniór blames Oscar’s fate on the fukú, but perhaps Oscar’s inability to come to terms with his identity and find a community that will accept him fully, like Lola did, is what leaves him doomed.

While *Oscar Wao* again draws attention to the struggles Dominican immigrants face when confronted with conflicting perceptions of their racial, national, and cultural identities, Cruz’s novel *Soledad* brings attention to the problems that having light skin can cause in a community marked by dark skin. Although lightness is more often than not a desirable trait, for Cruz’s titular character, her lightness works to separate her from her

family and her community, making her question the depth of her “Dominicanness.”

Soledad expresses her feelings of isolation when she admits she had always thought she was “switched at birth” because she doesn’t look like her mother, Olivia. Unlike Olivia, Soledad says “my hair falls pin straight, my eyes are smaller, shaped like almonds, and my skin is fairer” (16). Soledad’s lightness, especially, is viewed suspiciously because the man presumed to be her father, Manolo, had “skin the color of caramelized sugar” (59) and could not see traces of himself in his daughter. Although Olivia claimed Soledad was Manolo’s child, she had been working as a prostitute when they met and it becomes increasingly clear to Manolo that Soledad is the offspring of one of Olivia’s white clients. Cruz writes,

Since the day [Soledad] was born, [Manolo] watched her, waited to find a trace of himself in her and the paler she became, her nose, the shape of her eyes, her fine straight hair, neither Olivia’s or his, Manolo lost faith in her. Olivia knew he felt humiliated. Deep down, he knew Soledad wasn’t his child. (150)

Rather than viewing his daughter’s light skin with admiration and pride, then, Manolo sees it as a reminder of his wife’s former profession.

Although the uncertainty of her paternity gave Soledad a reason to feel rejected by her father, her light skin still serves as capital in the eyes of her maternal grandmother, Doña Sosa. When she looks at Soledad, Doña Sosa does not see the product of an anonymous client of Olivia’s and the cuckolding of her husband Manolo, but instead the affirmation “that there is truly some Spanish blood left in her bloodline.” She assures Soledad that her appearance is “every woman’s dream. Una melena [long, flowing hair] that will find you a good husband” (136). Soledad’s aunt Gorda, on the other hand, is

suspicious of her origins like Manolo and asks Soledad, “Whose daughter are you anyway?” (136).

Soledad’s lightness also separates her from her cousin, Flaca. When Flaca’s friend Caty mistakes Soledad for a “freaking white girl,” Flaca responds, “That ain’t no hippy white girl chick, that’s Soledad” (26). Throughout the novel Flaca treats Soledad with contempt on the one hand and jealousy on the other, as the boy Flaca likes is interested in Soledad. Flaca’s resentment extends to all white girls, however, as the white girlfriends of the boys in the neighborhood frequently give Flaca a hard time. She grumbles, “Fugly white bitches walking around here like they own the block ’cause homeboys treat them like they beauty queens just ’cause they blanquitas” (54). For Flaca, although her community is comprised primarily of darker Dominicans, the local boys correlate whiteness with beauty, a beauty she has no chance of attaining. Her universal derision is transferred to her cousin as an individual, however, further isolating Soledad from her family.

In the absence of a supportive biological family, Soledad creates an alternative social family through her friends, especially her roommate Caramel, a Chicana from Texas. Itzigsohn, Giorguli and Vazquez make the argument that because American racial categories often include Dominicans within the “panethnic category Hispanic or latino/a [sic]” (51), many Dominican Americans self-identify as hispano/a based largely on “the internalization of beliefs about how the mainstream others perceive the immigrant self” (52). Because her lighter skin color makes her national origins ambiguous, it makes sense that Soledad would identify more closely with a Chicana friend who accepts her as part

of her community rather than with a family who views her suspiciously because of her color.

Although Caramel may treat Soledad like family, she does not allow Soledad's internalized preference for whiteness to go unchallenged. Despite her professed discomfort with her own appearance, many of Soledad's behaviors support the Dominican preference for whiteness rather than challenge it. For example, when she first met Caramel, Soledad told her she was from the Upper West Side; when Caramel reacted negatively and asked Soledad how she could "stand it up there" in "gringolandia" (12), Soledad modified her answer and said she was from Washington Heights.<sup>44</sup> Caramel responded that Soledad should "say it like it is, mujer" (13), meaning that she should not be afraid of her national and ethnic origins but rather embrace them. On another occasion Caramel confronts Soledad about her "thing for white boys," which Soledad rejects, claiming, "I like cute guys. That's all" (77). She justifies her disinterest in Richie, a boy from her neighborhood, by saying "[he's] not my type, he lives in the hood," although she imagines Caramel would claim it's because Richie is not white (86).

Despite her internal justifications for her actions and attitudes, Caramel does make Soledad feel uncomfortable when she calls her out. She says, "It felt worse than being called a blanquita back home: a sellout, wannabe white girl" (12-13). Soledad does "sell out," though, especially when she takes a job in an upscale art gallery, and Caramel does not let her forget it. Caramel cuts a visit to the gallery short by saying, "God forbid they see two spics in here, they might just start hiding their pocketbooks" (68). While

---

<sup>44</sup> Washington Heights is a neighborhood in Upper Manhattan, north of Harlem, with a majority Dominican population; it is often used as a metonym for "Dominican," similar to the way "Harlem" may be used to signify "African American."

Caramel is clearly joking, she is also intentionally challenging Soledad's choice of job which she views as catering to the wealthy, and white, upper classes. She warns Soledad that the gallery is a trap and encourages them both to "start our own thing, make our own rules, where the sky is the limit. A place where our mamis can come and visit and not feel like they don't belong" (67). Although Soledad protests that this particular gallery is not that exclusive, Caramel counters by reminding Soledad that they hired her "because you're not brown like me and you have Cooper Union as your passport" (68). Caramel's argument here is that both Soledad's light skin color and her educational credentials grant her entry to social and cultural spaces that would not welcome someone who is darker, like Caramel herself.

Unlike Soledad, Caramel is not afraid to openly point out that Soledad's light skin will afford her opportunities that would not be available to people with darker skin, and one of these people is Flaca. While Soledad seeks acceptance outside of Washington Heights in the art world, Flaca seeks to create a community within her neighborhood, even if that community includes people who aren't Dominican. Flaca's best friend Caty is Haitian, and although her mother Gorda is suspicious of Caty and calls her a "cocola,"<sup>45</sup> Flaca feels a solidarity with her friend. Cruz writes, "Everybody tells Flaca that she and Caty look like sisters. They both have skin the color of cinnamon sticks, thin eyebrows and a tiny birthmark on their cheek" (51). Indeed, as Torres-Saillant argues, because the larger American community does not often distinguish between immigrants from the east and west sides of Hispaniola, "necessity allies Dominicans with Haitians. Anti-

---

<sup>45</sup> "Cocolo/a" is a racial slur generally referring to any Caribbean immigrant of African descent, but it is particularly applied to Haitians in New York. For the most part its use is pejorative.

Haitianism, in other words, becomes impractical” in the United States, particularly for Dominicans with dark skin (“Tribulations,” 1108).

Both Soledad and Flaca try to create a sense of home in the United States by aligning themselves with the communities that accept them, but for their parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents, “home” will always be the Dominican Republic. Soledad reflects, “In New York, they don’t live, they work, until we go home. My mother always told me that home is a place of rest, a place to live” (229). Because of her exclusion from her family, however, Soledad never felt at home in the Dominican community, and it is not until she returns to the island with her mother for a cleansing ritual that she is able to embrace the Dominican aspects of her identity. Just as Lola was able to find comfort in her skin, her hair, and her identity by returning to the Dominican Republic, so too is Soledad finally able to feel a part of her family by returning to the place where she began.

### **The Dominican-American Experience**

In a roundtable discussion with fellow Dominican author Nelly Rosario and two Haitian authors, Edwidge Danticat and Myraim J.A. Chancy, Loida Maritza Pérez remarks that the intertwined histories of the United States and the Dominican Republic make it “absurd to suppose there are specific ways in which to be either Dominican or American” (qtd. in Candelario 75). Both those who remain on the island and those who leave possess powerful myths about their history, culture, class and race; however, Pérez argues that the difference between those who leave and those who stay “is that those who leave are more prone to question those myths” (qtd. in Candelario 76). Torres-Saillant,

too, sees value in Dominicans' questioning what they've been taught in an attempt to overcome their negrophobic upbringings, but at the same time he is suspicious of the consequences of Dominicans rejecting their own particular histories and submitting to North American conceptions of race. He asks, "can upholding a sense of racial identity that stems from the imposition of one's environment be considered liberating?"

("Tribulations," 1109) Here Torres-Saillant gets to the heart of the dilemma many Dominican Americans face in their attempt to carve out an identity in the diaspora: is it better to live fully within the racial paradigm of the United States or to hold on to some vestige of Dominican conceptions of race?

While neither Pérez nor Torres-Saillant offer definitive answers for the questions their comments raise, Pérez does attempt to make sense of the complications inherent in the lives of Dominican Americans who try to straddle two cultures, two languages, and two distinct racial paradigms in her 1999 novel *Geographies of Home*, as does newcomer Anney Báez in her 2007 collection of short stories, *My Daughter's Eyes and Other Stories*. Pérez's work recounts the experiences of a lower-class family of Dominican immigrants in Brooklyn who try to carve out a sense of home amidst a barrage of racial discrimination, socioeconomic distress, mental illness, and, as Díaz phrased it, "people-of-color self-hate." Báez's stories explore how a middle-class Dominican American family maintains a connection to home, history, and culture in their diaspora life in the Bronx.

Like Cruz's Soledad and Díaz's de León family, the characters in Pérez's novel seek to establish a sense of home in an environment that is often cruel and unforgiving to

immigrant families; unfortunately, though, financial circumstances make it impossible for the family in *Geographies* to return home to the island, even on brief visits, and so the home they make in New York is the home they must live with. For Iliana, this means escaping her parents' house and trying to build a new life at a college upstate. For Marina, this means imagining a life in a beautiful single-family home with a white husband and children, while at the same time battling the mental illness that is destroying her. The ruptured lives of these characters exacerbate the discrimination they experience, from both within and without the Dominican American community.

*Geographies of Home* is largely the story of Iliana, the youngest girl in a family of fourteen children. Iliana saw college as a way to break free from her circumstances, not only because it would provide her an opportunity for a better economic future, but more immediately because it offered her a way to escape her strict Seventh-Day Adventist home in Brooklyn. Her road to the university was not an easy one, however, as she not only had to convince her parents to let her go, but she also had to work against the advice of her high school guidance counselors who told her she was not smart enough to apply. They warned her she would be terribly hurt by the rejections, and even if she did happen to get in, "people outside the city are not like us. Even just upstate they're—well—you know—racist. They won't want you there" (66). While the counselors' warnings are a bit ironic, since racism exists in the city as well, Iliana did experience terrible discrimination in her seemingly idyllic college town. The novel opens with "The ghostly trace of 'NIGGER' on a message board hanging from Iliana's door" (1), and it is revealed that this was not the first time the term had been used against her.

In the university curriculum, too, Iliana found that the courses she took “disclaimed life as she had known it, making her feel invisible” (4), and that she had to train her ears not to hear her classmates who “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” (71). Assaulted by the ignorance of her professors and peers, Iliana has to give up the belief she had brought with her to the town: “that, having entered into the company of the elite, she would never again suffer hunger or abuse” (71). Much of the abuse Iliana suffered prior to coming to the university occurred in her neighborhood in Brooklyn, where hers was one of only a few Dominican families. She longed to look like either the Puerto Rican girls or the black American girls, and so belong to what she saw as one coherent group. Pérez writes, Iliana “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 like the Johnson girls from down the street” (190). As it was, though, Iliana fit into neither group. Much like Oscar in Díaz’s novel, Iliana found herself without a community because her dark skin color conflicted with her accent in the eyes of those around her, and this situation did not change when she went away to school.

Torres-Saillant makes the argument that in the Dominican Republic, dissociation from blackness is necessary for blacks and mulattos given the barrage of negrophobic rhetoric aimed at them from birth. Indeed, he says that “Should blacks and mulattos fully identify with the systematic disparagement deployed against them by the Eurocentric discourse of the country’s intellectual élite, they would probably suffer from acute self-

loathing and chronic alienation” (“Tribulations,” 1102). On the island, then, a strong Dominican identity serves as an antidote for racial discrimination and allows those with dark skin to fully incorporate themselves into society. In the United States, however, Iliana finds herself caught between her color and her culture, and without a strong connection to either she is unable to establish her own identity.

Despite the assaults she suffers, Iliana somehow manages to escape the fate of self-hatred, but the same cannot be said for her sister Marina. Even within her own family, Marina is considered ugly and her sister Beatriz declares that “No one... would ever consider her attractive. Not with her baboon nose and nigger lips” (42). Unable to cope with her family’s abuse, Marina falls into a deep state of mental illness where she creates a fantasy life for herself in which she imagines “a white man or at least a light-skinned Hispanic like herself would come into her life” (17). Marina’s skin is shades lighter than that of any of her sisters, but it had “blinded her to her kinky, dirt-red hair, her sprawling nose, her wide, long lips” (18). In other words, Marina had used her lightness to negate the phenotypic markers that connected her to an African heritage, something she had grown to hate about herself.

Marina not only hates the traces of blackness and Africa in her own appearance, but throughout the novel she reveals a hatred and fear of all black people. She tells Iliana that black men are “lazy as shit and undependable” and when Iliana asks her if she thinks all black people, including herself, are inferior, Marina declares, “I’m Hispanic, not black” (38). Marina extends the fiction by claiming that “White people have always been nicer to me than anyone else” (39), despite the fact that the only white people she has

known are teachers and bosses whom Iliana points out are paid to be nice to Marina. In truth, Marina has bought into the Dominican myth of cultural whiteness, and her delusion takes her to a white neighborhood in Brooklyn where she stands outside an idyllic home, imagining herself taking care of the house and a white husband. Her reverie is interrupted by reality when a black man in a car gets into an accident when he tries to avoid hitting her in the street. Marina runs away in fear but is further humiliated on the subway ride home by the disgusted reactions of her fellow passengers to her poor hygiene. Pérez writes, “The knowledge gathered from the eyes of the others had carved a path into her brain to become a part of her very being, unreconcilable as the color of her skin and the texture of her hair” (87).

Unable to negotiate the hatred she feels for blackness with the reactions of the outside world to her own appearance, Marina begins to hallucinate that a black intruder is breaking into her basement bedroom to rape her. While it is unclear whether or not Marina is recalling something that actually happened to her, she does imagine that her rapist is at one time her brother Tico and at another time her sister Iliana. Her fear of her family exemplifies her self-loathing as it demonstrates that she sees the threat as coming from her own blood. Her only defense against this internal threat is to further separate herself from her African heritage. She pronounces, “No flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger would claim her soul. No savage with beads dangling from his neck. She would survive all this. There was nothing else to lose. Nothing else to fear” (17). In a manic state, Marina gets into a hot shower where she proceeds to shave the hair from her body and scrub down her skin with Brillo pads; when she can no longer stand the scouring she

sprays her entire body with Lysol, literally disinfecting herself from what she views as a pestilence—her own African heritage.

While her sister chooses to succumb to both her illness and the cultural myths of her race and heritage, Iliana chooses to use her history, her experiences, and her ancestry to “aid her in her passage through the world” (321). She builds a sense of identity and home precisely in the difficulties she must face and despite the forces working against her. In the same way, Pérez challenges the children of Hispaniola to acknowledge how the island’s “tangled history has formed us,” but at the same time to “progress from that history” (qtd. in Candelario 89).

Pérez’s novel touches on the deep psychological wounds ravaged on Dominicans by their history of racial denial and self-hatred, wounds that are only compounded by experiences of discrimination in the United States. While Pérez does not offer any solutions, she does draw attention to the deep internal division many Dominican immigrants feel between how they see themselves and how they are perceived by others. In her work, Báez seeks to heal some of these wounds by offering her readers a picture of the Dominican community they can connect with, a picture that is not wholly negative. A psychotherapist by training, Báez has commented that her readers “identify with the struggles of the young women in the book and understand their bicultural conflicts” (qtd. in “Annecy Báez”). This understanding has opened up a dialogue about the issues facing Latino/a immigrants today.

Similar to the works of Cruz, *My Daughter’s Eyes and Other Stories* chronicles the lives of a single family living both in the Bronx and in the Dominican Republic. And,

just as Díaz uses the character of Yunió as a focal point for *Drown*, Báez circles the action around Mia, who uses writing to record and comment on the events around her. Many of the stories are written in first person from Mia's perspective which offers the reader the distinctive opportunity to see the world of the Bronx and the Dominican Republic from the ground level.

Although Mia mostly just records her interactions with boys and with her friends, it is not surprising that her observations are frequently peppered with physical descriptions of people that include an assessment of their skin color and features. In his own recollection of growing up in Santiago, Torres-Saillant remarks that "people did not have race—they had color and skin hue, and, the Caucasian bias notwithstanding, one spoke of color there the same way one spoke of height or shoe size: as a personal distinguishing feature" ("Meditations," 13). For Mia, too, her attention to shades of skin and physical features gives the impression that she is merely describing the people she is writing about. These descriptions are quite different from those in Pérez's novel in that they are not coupled with overt discrimination or moments of self-hate, but they are not culturally neutral; they do still reflect the cultural values associated with these shades that Mia has internalized.

Throughout the collection, Báez associates lightness with sexual desire, especially through the characters of Mia's two best friends, her cousin Eva and friend America. Both girls are described as having light skin, but this lightness is coupled with the girls being portrayed not only as objects of admiration for the boys in the neighborhood, but also as sexually active at a young age. Eva is described as being pretty, "with her light

smooth skin like sea stones and eyes a blue violet set upon her heart-shaped Dominican face” (6). She does have “*pelo malo*, ‘bad hair’ the family calls it,” but Mia claims this doesn’t bother Eva because her “huge breasts” make up for it (6). In this sense, Eva replaces what would be viewed as a deficiency in her appearance, her dark hair that is “kinky like Brillo” (6), with the physical asset of large breasts, something that makes her more attractive and is a “source of pride to her” (6). America is described as having “a violin-shaped body too overdeveloped for her thirteen years of age” and the older men at the *colmado* call her “*Rubia linda*,” or beautiful blonde, when she passes by (32). The girls are not just objects for admiration, however, as Mia notes that both girls go into the bedroom of one of their male friends to experiment sexually, something she herself is not ready for.

Unlike her friends, Mia describes herself as having “a wide nose like sighing mountains across my face, and large thick lips Papi calls a ‘*bembe*’” (6). Interestingly, the word “*bembe*” has several meanings that can all be traced back to Africa: the Bembe are an ethnic and linguistic group from Central Africa; Bembe is a town in Angola; and, in Yoruban beliefs, a *bembé* is a party for the orishas, the pantheon of deities. In any of these senses, the nickname Mia’s father has for her connects her back to her African roots. Neither Mia nor her father sees shame in this connection; it is, in fact, something that endears her to him.

Similarly, the stories Mia’s close family friend Aura tells her when she falls ill point not only to Mia’s indigenous ancestors, but her African ones as well. Aura tells Mia stories “about our ancestor, los Taíno Indians, or Yoruba stories about Yemaya, Oshun,

Elegua and Obatala. She shares the mysteries with me, the knowledge of the spiritual world” (49). Aura sees power in Dominican ancestors, but she includes all their ancestors, not just the ones who are sanctioned by the state. And, Aura invokes the Yoruban pantheon of deities, even though this African-based religion is usually associated with Haiti and not considered to play a role in Dominican religious practice.

While Pérez’s Marina does everything she can to deny any association between herself and Africa, Báez’s work celebrates the African component of Dominican heritage. She reflects a positive reality for many Dominican Americans, one where color and shades of skin are certainly something to notice, but not necessarily something to fear. Her work, along with many of the texts discussed in this section, point to a hopeful future. While Dominicans in this future may not be entirely free from a damaging obsession with whiteness, they can at least move beyond the need to deny and denigrate a significant component of their identity.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the popular perception that the world is entering into a “post-racial” state, race, color, ethnicity, and nationality still matter tremendously, in both the United States and the Dominican Republic. As recently as November 2009, in fact, Dominican baseball star Sammy Sosa was photographed at the Latin Grammy Awards with his skin looking shades lighter than in previous photographs. Sosa claims a cream he was using to soften his skin had the additional effect of lightening it, and combined with the bright lights at the Grammys his face looked much whiter than it actually was (“Sosa”).

Whatever Sosa's true intentions were, the public comments on the article run the gamut from calling him ugly and sickening to defending his right to change his appearance in whatever way he wants. A few thoughtful and sincere comments even acknowledge the historical and cultural circumstances that might have influenced Sosa's actions.

Regardless of the public reactions, though, this incident makes it clear that even in today's political climate, a famous Dominican lightening his skin can still be considered national news.

Torres-Saillant refers to a similar incident in his "Meditations" essay—the backlash to an article in the June 13, 2007 edition of the *Miami Herald* entitled "Black Denial." Written by *Herald* foreign correspondent Frances Robles, the article "dramatizes the reticence of Dominicans to accept their blackness" and, according to Torres-Saillant, "brought in an unprecedented number of replies" that either qualified as hate mail or praised Robles for "revealing the truth" ("Meditations," 20). While Torres-Saillant would be the first to acknowledge the "truth" of a Caucasian bias in Dominican culture, he does not view the Dominican situation as unique in Latin America, and in fact argues that in contrast to prevailing assumptions, "US Dominicans [demonstrate] a greater propensity than any other Latino subgroup to classify themselves as black" ("Mediations," 21). Ever the optimist, Torres-Saillant further believes that Dominicans "do possess the ability to discern the phenotypical characteristics that distinguish one racial group from another, and they do recognize the traces of Africa in their ethnicity" ("Tribulations," 1089).

One scholar who does not share Torres-Saillant's optimism is Stinchcomb, who contends that despite the important role it has to play in defining Dominican identity, literature "that appropriates blackness remains on the margins of canonical literature because its themes challenge an official history of distortion that continues to be the basis of Dominicanity" (113). I would argue, however, that contemporary Dominican and Dominican American literature is rapidly changing this, as demonstrated by the works and writers studied in this section. Not only are these writers unafraid to both acknowledge the presence of Africa in their identities, but their work does not shy away from critiquing their culture's white bias and making known the many damaging effects that can and do emerge from this bias. It also seems unfair to label the work of these writers as "marginal." A quick search of Alvarez's name in the MLA International Bibliography produces over 125 scholarly results; Díaz received the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Oscar Wao*; and a recent article in the *Publication of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association* makes a convincing case for the canonization of Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (Ayuso).

In an interview with Díoigenes Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, Díaz reveals that he writes with a political agenda, one that opens up discussion and criticism of important issues within his communities. He asserts, "Exposing white racism and white arrogance is important, but, if I don't criticize myself and my peoples, how are we ever going to get better?" (901) Like many of his contemporaries, Díaz considers his "communities" to include both the Latino and the black community. In a conversation between Cruz and

Rosario published in *Callaloo*,<sup>46</sup> in fact, both writers lay claim to being part of the African Diaspora. Cruz states, "...I feel like I grew up in a black context. I was in a Dominican community but before us there were African Americans, and right across the street from my house is where Malcolm X got shot, and that history is there and present" (744). For Rosario, although "black" primarily meant "African American" during her childhood in Brooklyn, she states that

Today, "black" is a more expansive label—as is "African American." Increased immigration of the Diaspora to the U.S. is teaching this country to reconsider its rigid definitions of race. In turn, immigrants are learning to redefine blackness as having just as well to do with political consciousness. (744)

The political consciousnesses of these writers are in fact what is changing the landscape of Dominican literature.

Torres-Saillant points out that Dominican history itself is what has "precluded the development of a discourse of black affirmation that would serve to counter balance intellectual negrophobia" ("Tribulations," 1096). In a country where no one is black, what need would there be for a positive rhetoric of blackness? However, Dominicans both on the island and in the diaspora may learn from social justice movements in the United States. Torres-Saillant imagines that "The diaspora will render an inestimable service to the Dominican people if it can help to rid the country of white supremacist thought and negrophobic discourse, to whatever extent those aberrations may survive in Dominican society, and allow finally a celebration of our rich African heritage" ("Tribulations," 1109).

---

<sup>46</sup> *Callaloo* is a highly respected academic journal that specializes in literary criticism and cultural studies of the African Diaspora.

Cruz is certainly representative of the new generation of diaspora Dominicans whose works celebrate the African components of Dominican heritage. Interestingly, her entrée into the world of writing began with the discovery of African American literature in college and has continued to include work from the Caribbean diaspora; she tells Torres-Saillant in an interview for the Caribbean Arts and Letters journal *Calabash* that she does not consider Caribbean peoples to be “disconnected from the African experience. I mean, we are African diaspora and it is just that we have suffered different geographic displacements” (113). Scholar Juanita Heredia describes Cruz as “a pioneer writer in the creation of Dominican diasporic letters in the United States because she honors the legacy of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in her writing and recognizes the embattled racial discourse...on the island and in the diaspora of the U.S. mainland” (87). While Cruz has not quite reached the canonical status of Alvarez and Díaz, her mindset and continued ability to draw attention to pressing issues within and without the Dominican community point to a bright future for Dominican literature.

While hope for the future of Dominican literature can certainly be seen in the younger generation of writers, the beginning steps towards a positive change have already been taken by the more established writers, Alvarez first and foremost among them. In her essay “A White Woman of Color,” Alvarez argues that Latinos/as in the United States cannot afford to divide themselves along color lines (or a color continuum) and that reductive definitions of what it means to be Latino/a are “absurd when we are talking about a group whose very definition is that of a mestizo race, a mixture of European, indigenous, African, and much more” (149). Alvarez sees potential in the

Latino/a community to serve as a positive model of multiculturalism and multiracialism. Rosario, too, sees value in what Latinos/as, and specifically Dominicans, can bring to the table. She remarks, “They say we Dominicans are fixated on hybridity. Race complex aside, maybe that doesn’t have to be such a bad thing” (Cruz and Rosario 745). Indeed, at a time when the most powerful man in the world can be the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, perhaps a fixation with hybridity can actually be a positive thing.

## Part Two: Puerto Rico

The island of Puerto Rico<sup>47</sup> lies a mere 80 miles east of the Dominican Republic, and like their neighbors to the west, Puerto Ricans continue to maintain a strong cultural connection to their Hispanic heritage, in language, religion, and cultural customs. In fact, as Mervyn C. Alleyne contends, “There are more claims of European ancestry...in Puerto Rico than elsewhere. The adjective *hispanico* is also frequently used in reference to Puerto Rican culture” (125). Indeed, from the beginning of the twentieth century Puerto Rico has often been referred to as “the whitest of the Antilles” (Duany, *Puerto Rican Nation* 247; Roy-Féquièrre 5) and in the 2000 U.S. census, 80.5 percent of the island’s residents categorized their race as white, while only 8 percent reported themselves as black or African American; this percentage represents a steady increase in the island’s white population since the early nineteenth century (Duany, *Puerto Rican Nation* 248).

What is most surprising about these figures, of course, is that they seem to counter the official Puerto Rican nationalist mythos which, according to Jorge Duany, “presupposes the harmonious integration among the three roots of the Island’s population: Amerindian, European, and African” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 24-25). Unlike the official discourse in the Dominican Republic, which rhetorically erases *any*

---

<sup>47</sup> It stands to remind the reader that unlike the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico is not an independent, sovereign nation, but rather officially the “Commonwealth of Puerto Rico,” a self-governing protectorate of the United States.

connection to an African heritage, Puerto Ricans are raised to believe that they are the descendants of Taínos, Spaniards, *and* Africans. In her essay “Rapping Two Versions of the Same Requiem,” in fact, Raquel Z. Rivera reflects, “In grade school we are taught that Puerto Ricans are the product of three unions: Spanish (white?), African (black?), and Indian (red?)” (253). This acknowledgment of the contributions of various cultures to Puerto Rican society is more commonly referred to as *mestizaje*.<sup>48</sup> The creolization of Puerto Rican culture after centuries of biological and cultural mixing amongst indigenous, Spanish, and African peoples has resulted in an almost sacrosanct belief in *la gran familia puertorriqueña*,<sup>49</sup> a homogenous society bound together through culture, language, and a shared history.

Indeed, just as *antihaitianismo* ideology was/is sanctioned and disseminated by the State in the Dominican Republic (and equated with the concept of *dominicanidad*), so too has the ideology (and myth) of Puerto Rican racial harmony, in the form of *mestizaje*, been perpetuated through official State channels, including the *Instituto de Cultural Puertorriqueña* (Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, or ICP). This myth is essential to the concept of Puerto Ricanness, or *la puertorriqueñidad*. Jocelyn A. Géliga Vargas, Irmaris Rosas Nazario, and Tania Delgado Hernández argue that both this historical narrative and the cultural values associated with it are perpetuated by the ICP through education materials, the media, and popular cultural events (116). These values are also visually

---

<sup>48</sup> As mentioned on page 16 of the introduction, *mestizaje* is the biological and cultural blending of Amerindian, African, and European elements.

<sup>49</sup> Literally, “the great Puerto Rican family.”

represented in the ICP's official emblem, which contains a picture of a *cacique*<sup>50</sup> holding a *cemí* (an artistic stone carving), representing Taíno heritage; a knight, or conquistador, representing Spanish heritage; and a black man holding a drum and a machete, representing African heritage. While on the one hand this emblem seems to give equal sway to each pillar of Puerto Rican society, as Géliga Vargas, Rosas Nazario and Delgado Hernández point out, “Even a cursory interpretation of ICP rhetoric leads the critical reader to conclude that the myth of national integration in Puerto Rico pivots on the reduction of racial identities to stereotypes and predetermines the order of their subsequent stratification,” as the emblem grants artistic value to the Taíno and nobility to the Spaniard, but “reduces the African to a ‘hard-working’ common man” (117). Hence, the essential flaw in the myth of Puerto Rican racial harmony is that although on the surface the three roots may be equally represented, in reality they are not equally valued.

This myth of racial harmony permeates more than ICP activities and emblems, of course; the concept of *mestizaje* leads many Puerto Ricans to claim that on their island there is no racism. Miriam Jimenez Roman argues that Puerto Ricans consider themselves to be “the quintessential ‘rainbow people,’ a nation of mestizos free of the ‘racial’ concerns and conflicts so rampant in the United States” (9). Likewise, Rivera quips that Puerto Ricans are raised to believe that their diversity as a people renders them incapable of racism “because anybody’s grandmother could turn out to be black” (253), referencing the popular expression, “*y tu abuela ¿adonde está?*”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> A Taíno chief.

<sup>51</sup> Literally, “and your grandmother, where did she come from?” Its colloquial meaning points out the great likelihood that all Puerto Ricans have at least one forebear with an African heritage.

Much of this thinking stems from the work of Puerto Rican writer Tomás Blanco, who argued in his seminal text *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* that racial prejudice as understood in a North American context did not exist in Puerto Rico, and that what Americans might think of as racial prejudice is better understood as a social prejudice (63). His intent, according to Magali Roy-Féquièrre, was to ease some of the growing social tensions of the 1930s by showing “that racial prejudice in Puerto Rico was not as brutal and nefarious as the North American brand” and that “Puerto Rico had never experienced ‘true’ racism, only a benign form of racial prejudice” (126). He even goes so far as to call Puerto Rican racial prejudice “the innocent game of a child” (qtd. in West-Durán, “Puerto Rico,” 157). While it is true, as Alleyne argues, that “there is no publicly sanctioned institutional racism” in Puerto Rico (135), as there might be in the Dominican Republic or the United States for that matter, American sociologist Maxine Gordon argued in her influential 1950 article “Cultural Aspects of Puerto Rico’s Race Problem” that the Puerto Rican claim of no racial prejudice “is intended to divert attention from what many believe ‘causes’ race prejudice: the ‘Negro blood’ they or fellow Puerto Ricans may possess” (382). This fear of black blood echoes an earlier claim made by Blanco in his 1935 essay “Elogio de la plena”: “We have abundant black blood, and for that we should not be ashamed; but, in honoring the truth, we cannot be classified as a black people” (1004).<sup>52</sup> Here, Blanco’s claim echoes the sentiments of Dominican thinkers who on the one hand acknowledge a biological connection to an African heritage

---

<sup>52</sup> This is my translation of the text. The original text reads as follows: “Tenemos abundante sangre negra, de la que no hay por qué avergonzarse; empero, haciendo honor a la verdad, no se nos puede clasificar como pueblo negro.”

but deny a cultural association with blackness, based on an imposed fear of what that blackness implicates.

Writing almost in direct contradiction to Blanco's ideas, writer Isabelo Zenón Cruz's 1974 study *Narciso descubre su trasero* challenges the logic behind the expression "*negro puertorriqueño*," asking why a black Puerto Rican is identified as black before he is considered Puerto Rican when the very use of the adjective is hypocritical. Even more influential, however, is José Luis González's 1980 essay, *El país de cuatro pisos*, or *The Four-Storeyed Country*, in which he argues that although it is commonplace for Puerto Ricans to acknowledge the three historical roots of Puerto Rican culture—the Taíno, the African, and the Spanish—what is not a commonplace "is to say that of these three roots the one that is most important, for economic and social—and hence cultural—reasons, is the African" (9). González's argument, essentially, is that the first Puerto Ricans (in the national and cultural senses of the term) were, in fact, *black* Puerto Ricans, and that the popular culture and history of the island is Afro-Antillean in nature, not Hispanic, and certainly not white. He dismisses the idea that racism is an idea imported from the United States and charges that

those who reason thus either don't know or have forgotten an elementary historical truth: the experience of racism of Puerto Rican blacks came not from Americans, but from Puerto Rican society. In other words, those who have discriminated against blacks in Puerto Rico haven't been Americans, but white Puerto Ricans. (24)

González calls for the dismantling of the myth of social, racial, and cultural homogeneity which silences the truly diverse voices of the population.

The historical roots of Puerto Rican *mestizaje* reach back to its founding as a Spanish colony. Like the Dominican Republic, the particular colonial and settlement history of the island encouraged an environment that favored conditions for manumission and racial mixing. When Columbus first landed on the island<sup>53</sup> in 1493, there were estimated to be between fifty and sixty thousand Taíno inhabitants who were quickly enslaved, and nearly just as quickly decimated by disease and abuse. Alleyne contends that despite the popular belief that Africans were only brought in to replace the native labor force, African slaves known as *ladinos*<sup>54</sup> were probably brought in along with the Spanish armies (115). By 1519 the immigration of *ladinos* halted in favor of the importation of *bozales*,<sup>55</sup> although the trade was minimal on the island because Puerto Rican settlers could not afford to buy as many slaves as other Caribbean colonies (Alleyne 116). Jan Rogoziński argues that slaves virtually disappeared from Puerto Rico after 1600, along with the sugar plantation (53), a fact that is supported by census data that records whites as the majority ethnic group by the end of the sixteenth century (Alleyne 116). Both Alleyne and Rogoziński argue that the low numbers of African slaves and relatively high numbers of whites and free blacks created conditions that were favorable to racial mixing. Alleyne points out that free blacks were active participants in the island's social and religious activities and the multiple points of contact amongst the races led to "a spread of cultural forms through the different ethnic (and social) groups,

---

<sup>53</sup> The native Taínos called the island "Borikén," from which the oft-used word "Boricua" is derived. Puerto Ricans both past and present commonly use the phrase "Yo soy Boricua" to identify themselves as Puerto Rican.

<sup>54</sup> "*Ladinos*" are peninsular blacks who came chiefly from Seville, Lisbon and the Canary Islands.

<sup>55</sup> "*Bozales*" refers to black slaves that come directly from Africa.

resulting in a Puerto Rico which is more culturally homogenous than other Caribbean societies” (117-118).

Despite the colony’s seemingly liberal attitudes towards racial mixing, however, a strong cultural preference towards whiteness developed throughout the Spanish colonial period that is still pervasive in Puerto Rico today. A 1783 Spanish law allowed individuals of “pronounced but mixed African heritage,” who could afford the payment of five hundred to eight hundred pesos, to obtain a certificate called a “*cédula de gracias al sacar*” that declared the person legally white (Guerra 215). Alleyne references the 1815 *Cédula Real de Gracias*, or Royal Decree, that “encouraged European migration, bringing to Puerto Rico a large mass of free but impoverished whites” (120) and further contributed to the whitening of the population.

More significant than the practices of buying whiteness and encouraging white immigration, however, was the cultural imperative to “*mejorar la raza*,” or “improve the race” through the practices of miscegenation and “marrying white.” Alleyne indicates that in addition to the forced miscegenation between white males and indigenous and black females,<sup>56</sup> Spanish laws favored manumission which allowed for more consensual unions between persons of different races (120). And, according to Lillian Guerra, in contrast to the “one-drop” rule in the United States, in which any amount of African ancestry qualified a person as black, the prevailing theory in Puerto Rico forecasted the extinction

---

<sup>56</sup> María Pérez y González fittingly reminds us that the earliest occurrences of miscegenation were not consensual: “Historically, Puerto Ricans experienced miscegenation primarily as a result of the Spanish conquistadors’ rape of Taínas and eventually, in some instances, through consensual sexual relations. Following Spain’s importation of thousands of African slaves, miscegenation occurred once again, with the Spaniards raping African women and with consensual relations between Taínas/os and Africans who engaged in forced labor side by side” (110).

of the African racial type through miscegenation: “the white race was capable of ‘*absorbing*’ the inferiority of the black race and obscuring the strength of the black race’s inherent qualities with its own” (217). Thus, mixed-race individuals were encouraged to adhere to “white cultural norms” in order to bring them “only steps away from whites on the pseudoscientific evolutionary ladder” (Guerra 217).

The preponderance of mixed marriages in Puerto Rico is often cited as tangible evidence that the culture is racially tolerant, but as Gordon rightly reveals, this claim is contradicted through the attitudes and behaviors of many white Puerto Ricans, both historically and presently: “On the one hand he [the Puerto Rican] claims tolerance, historically, for interracial marriages; on the other, he denies any part in the process” (385). In reality, as Alleyne reports, the white elite of Puerto Rico went to great lengths to maintain the “purity” of the white race; in response to the increase in interracial unions, a law called the *Código Negro Carolino* was implemented in the late eighteenth century in order to prevent white persons from marrying their black and mulatto slaves (121). Roy-Féquièrre points out that the concept of *limpieza de sangre*, or “cleanliness of blood” had been in practice in Spain for centuries with regard to Moorish and Jewish converts (201), and María Pérez y González argues that this practice was responsible for the *Expediente de Sangre*, or Blood Registry, that was recorded from the 1530s to the 1870s and used to deny “jobs of importance and political positions to those who were not ‘full-blooded’ Spaniards” (110). This registry became especially important for the Puerto Rican elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well-to-do families with mixed-race origins would commonly offer their daughters as wives for deserting white sailors and other poor

European immigrants, as long as they were white and had a pure Spanish or other European ancestry. According to Alleyne, “the titles of white and Spaniard were rich property in themselves” (134) and would more often than not make up for any lack of material means.

On March 22, 1873, the Spanish crown officially abolished slavery in Puerto Rico, although at the time there were just over 30,000 slaves remaining on the island, a relatively small percentage of the island’s population of nearly three-quarters of a million (Knight 263, 264). According to Guerra, the majority of blacks and mulattos living on the island at the time were already free laborers, and with the emancipation of all persons of African origin, the *gente libre de color*<sup>57</sup> had even more motivation to distance themselves from what they perceived as the stain of slavery, which in effect meant distancing themselves from blackness (222-223, 218). Their need for distance became even greater on the eve of the United States’ occupation at the end of the nineteenth century, for as Alan West-Durán phrases it, “To tout one’s African ancestry [at that time] was for many to evoke a past of humiliation and shame” (“Pleasures and Traumas,” 54).

Indeed, the liberation of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1897 and the ensuing American colonization of the island in 1898 set in motion a period of cultural tumult that, in many ways, is still in effect today. Although before 1898 Puerto Ricans of African descent had to adhere to a system of cultural norms that were informed by the white elite, after the American invasion, most (if not all) Puerto Ricans found themselves in conflict with the new racial and cultural model imported from North America, one that defined

---

<sup>57</sup> Free persons of color.

them as “black” by the “one-drop” rule. The growing pains were felt by both light- and dark-skinned Puerto Ricans alike: as Guerra argues, “white Puerto Ricans now had a ‘whiter’ standard to which they needed to aspire in order to gain North American approval [and] darker Puerto Ricans found themselves doubly disadvantaged” (219). Not surprisingly, then, Puerto Ricans who encouraged the American occupation found themselves both downplaying the issue of “race” and minimizing the black presence on the island in order to avoid the classification of Puerto Ricans as a “black” people (Jimenez Roman 15).

The island’s elites were perhaps hit hardest by the United States’ presence, at least initially. Roy-Féquièrè notes that despite their belief in their own whiteness, most Puerto Ricans were classified as “colored” by the invading troops, and the elites especially “came face to face with a new version of white supremacy that placed even the whitest and most educated islanders in a subservient position to the Euro-American” (6). Faced with a cultural identity crisis, island intellectuals and nationalists sought to define the national character in opposition to their North American invaders, and they did this largely by reclaiming their Spanish colonial past and glorifying the figure of the *jíbaro*. A *jíbaro* in the literal sense of the word is a mountain peasant from the interior of the island. He is presumed to be white because the interior of the island is typically populated with lighter-skinned individuals while the darker populations tended to settle in the coastal areas (West-Durán, “Pleasures and Traumas” 50). Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten, Jr., however, point out that like all Puerto Ricans the *jíbaro* varies in phenotype from brown to black, but as a cultural (and national) symbol, the *jíbaro* is presented as a pure,

although poor, descendant of Spanish settlers, and therefore *white* (14). *Jibaros* were visually represented as pale figures, often with straw hats, whose obvious avoidance of racial miscegenation proved their descent from Spanish *hidalgos*,<sup>58</sup> not from Afro-mestizo slaves (Guerra 82).

Roy-Féquièrre writes extensively of the *jibarista* discourse in her excellent study, *Women, Creole Identity, and Intellectual Life in Early Twentieth-Century Puerto Rico*, and claims that the *jibarista* writings of the *Generación del Treinta*<sup>59</sup> were:

an attempt by the elite to incorporate certain aspects of peasant identity into the white *criollos*' concept of self. By construing the *jíbaro* as a passive and enduring white descendent of the Spaniards, elite discourses could simultaneously find racial kinship with the peasantry and at once portray this social subject as idle, compliant, and in need of management. . . elite intellectuals' whitening of the working classes in their *jibarista* discourse should be seen as an anxiety-ridden response to the new racial hierarchies imposed in Puerto Rico by the North American colonial machine. (26)

The whitening of the *jíbaro* and its adoption as the embodiment of true Puerto Rican culture, then, was necessary for the island's elites to emphasize their Spanish (white) roots at the expense of Puerto Rico's African (black) heritage. González, however, counters the validity of their attempt on several fronts. First, he argues that the original *jibaros*, who most certainly were immigrants from the Canary Islands, were poor countrymen who found it necessary to adopt many of the customs of the existing Puerto Rican poor, namely the slaves, in order to survive. Thus, what is commonly considered to

---

<sup>58</sup> *Hidalgos* were Spanish noblemen.

<sup>59</sup> A name assigned to a generation of Puerto Rican writers and thinkers who developed and published intellectual projects in the 1930s. According to Roy-Féquièrre, these writers "endeavored to respond to a new colonial reality, experienced, in different forms, by all Puerto Ricans during the first half of the twentieth century" (1). The aforementioned Tomás Blanco was a member of this group.

be “jíbaro food,” for example, is really “black food” (10-11). Secondly, while the myth of the *jíbaro* may survive in the writings of the elite, the *jíbaro* itself “has virtually ceased to have any demographic, economic, or cultural significance...And this at a time when it is really the proletarian Puerto Rican of mixed race who increasingly typifies popular society!” (26)

Although the American occupation of Puerto Rico prompted these crises of national, cultural, and racial identity for both the elite and popular classes on the island itself, it is crucial to remember that since 1900, and especially since Puerto Ricans were granted American citizenship by the Jones Act in 1917, great numbers of Puerto Ricans have been migrating to the mainland United States where they must again face conflicting definitions of their racial and cultural identities. Duany strongly argues that “The discourse of Puerto Ricanness needs to be expanded to include nearly half of the Puerto Rican people, who now live outside the Island, increasingly speak English, and blend Hispanic and American practices in their daily lives” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 207). Indeed, contemporary discussions of the construction of race in Puerto Rico should include the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of diasporic Puerto Ricans living on the mainland. Like the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico maintains a color-continuum system of racial classification with at least nineteen different racial categories in common use, compared to the binary black/white system employed in the United States (Duany, *Puerto Rican Nation* 237). And, as mentioned earlier, one drop of black blood does not render a person black in Puerto Rico, although one drop of white blood, along with status, wealth, and education, may qualify a person as white. Puerto Ricans’ perceptions of

themselves as racial beings often come into conflict with Americans' perceptions of them, especially if they fall on either the light or dark end of the color continuum.

The Puerto Rican color continuum itself is quite similar to that of the Dominican Republic, with a few different and differently used terms. While *indio/a* is the most commonly used racial euphemism in the Dominican Republic, *trigueño/a* is most commonly used in Puerto Rico. As mentioned in the previous section, the word itself means “wheat-colored,” or as Maritza Quiñones Rivera phrases it, “slightly toasted by the Caribbean sun” (165). Like *indio/a*, *trigueño/a* can also be used as a euphemism “to describe a non-white person when wishing not to use the words *negra* or *prieta*, which are generally considered offensive” (Jorge 185n). Quiñones Rivera further contends that although the *trigueño/a* has dark skin, s/he can possess more phenotypically European traits, including hair, lips, and nose, than other dark men and women on the island (165). In fact, just as in the Dominican Republic, skin color alone does not designate someone's race; phenotypic features play a significant role as well. The texture of one's hair (*pelo malo* for kinky, or African hair, and *pelo bueno* for straight, or European hair) and the size and shape of one's lips and nose<sup>60</sup> figure into their racial designation.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Alleyne indicates that “African-type lips and nose are described as *bembón* and *nariz chata*, respectively, the former a word of probably Bantu origin and the latter probably of an African source as well; they both are pejorative expressions” (150).

<sup>61</sup> In addition to *trigueño/a*, other common terms include *moreno/a* (another euphemism for “black,” although with a slightly negative connotation); *quemaíto/a* (brown skin); *jabao*, *jabó/á* (someone with light/white skin and kinky hair or other features that indicate an African ancestry); *grifo/a* (interchangeable with *jabó/a*, but more often used to describe someone with light skin, European features, and frizzy hair); *cano* (someone with white or grey hair); *colorao/a* (someone with a reddish hue to their skin); *jincho/a* (someone with light skin that has an unhealthy pallor; this term has a negative connotation); and *prieto/a* (dark, swarthy) (Alleyne 150; Jorge 185n).

These descriptors mean very little on the mainland, of course, where Puerto Ricans are more often than not placed into either the “black” or “white” racial category, depending on the shade of their skin. However, as Nancy S. Landale and R.S. Oropesa argue, more and more Puerto Ricans (and Latinos/as in general) reject what they see as the limiting U.S. racial dichotomy and opt instead to identify themselves by their nationality, or to adopt a panethnic identity such as Hispanic or Latino/a (234, 250). This tendency reflects the discrimination many Puerto Ricans face in the United States, whether they are a dark-skinned *trigueño/a* who is labeled an African-American, and must bear the racism and oppression associated with that label, or a light-skinned Puerto Rican who is forced to think of him/herself as a “person of color” for the first time and lose the privilege associated with the shade of her/his skin.

The racial experiences of mainland Puerto Ricans are certainly more complicated than I have presented them thus far, but they will be discussed in greater depth further in this section through the fiction and memoir of mainland writers Judith Ortiz Cofer, Esmeralda Santiago, Piri Thomas, and Edgardo Vega Yunqué. The work of these writers reflects the complex nature of the construction of race for mainland Puerto Ricans, both in the way(s) they view themselves racially and the way(s) they are defined by mainstream American culture. The intricate history of the construction of race on the island itself will also be examined through the works of island writers Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, and Mayra Santos-Febres. Writing both from the perspective of the white elite and the black underclass, these writers turn a critical gaze towards the destructive colonial history of the island; the effects and after-effects of slavery on the island’s

inhabitants; and the (false) idea that the island is a racially harmonious paradise where all three branches of the Puerto Rican family tree are valued equally.

### **Writing From the Island: History Both Past and Present**

When asked in an interview about the difference between Puerto Rican writers living off and those living on the island, contemporary Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos-Febres answered that the main difference “is the centrality of ethnic definitions. In Puerto Rico, you do not have to defend your Puerto Ricanness; it is a given. There are, however, other struggles such as the fight for political independence, the experience of racism and sexism, and the liberation of our imagination from colonialism” (qtd. in Birmingham-Pokorny 454). While the “Puerto Ricanness” of Santos-Febres and other island writers Ana Lydia Vega and Rosario Ferré may not be in question, in addition to the particular struggles Santos-Febres mentions, these three writers also tackle the question of how the Puerto Rican identity has developed in the face of colonialism, both Spanish and American, and the complicated constructions of race that exist on the island and have played a role in the problematic definition of Puerto Ricans as white and Hispanic. Writing about the plantation system in the mid-nineteenth century, of the Creole elite in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and of the black Puerto Rican’s struggle for influence and equality in the early- to mid-twentieth century, the works of Vega, Ferré, and Santos-Febres, respectively, both reflect and challenge not only the myth of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* as a harmonious family where each member is valued equally, but also how that myth came into being.

Alleyne has argued that a major contributing factor to the origination of the myth of Puerto Rican racial harmony was the relatively weak state of the plantation system on the island (120) which allowed both for more open mixing amongst the various racial groups and a continuous rise in the free peasant class consisting of both poor white laborers and free blacks and mulattos (124). This is not to say that slaves in Puerto Rico were treated any better than in other Caribbean colonies, however; in fact, Alleyne is quick to point out that “there is no doubt that Puerto Rican slavery was neither benign nor gentle” (131). Guerra supports this argument, and further points out that the relatively few slaves who did exist in Puerto Rico were dedicated almost exclusively to supporting the limited sugar industry, and because their numbers were fewer, their workload was perhaps more intense and severe than in other plantation societies (224). In her novella *Miss Florence’s Trunk*,<sup>62</sup> Ana Lydia Vega explores the world of the Puerto Rican plantation largely through the eyes of Miss Florence Jane, an English governess hired to educate the only child of the wealthy Lind family. According to Virginia Adán-Lifante, Vega’s intention in this work is “to rescue some of the forgotten threads of Puerto Rican history, culture and identity” (10) by not only shining a critical light on the plantation system itself, but also by emphasizing the integral role that the African root of *la gran familia* had in shaping Puerto Rican identity.

The central family in *Miss Florence’s Trunk* is the Linds, consisting of the patriarch Edward Lind, who descends from a long line of Danish Caribbean landowners; his American wife Susan Morse-Lind, the daughter of Samuel Morse, the inventor of

---

<sup>62</sup> Originally published as *El baúl de Miss Florence: Fragmentos para un novelón romántico* in Vega’s 1991 collection *Falsas crónicas del sur*.

Morse code; and their son Charlie, the only member of the family to have been born and raised in Puerto Rico. The majority of the novella is written in the form of Miss Florence's diary, spanning the years 1856-1859, which she is compelled to review after learning of the drowning death of her former employer, Mrs. Lind, in 1885. While it has been documented that the real Susan Morse lived in Puerto Rico for forty years and married Edward Lind, in an interview with Elizabeth Hernández and Consuelo López Springfield, Vega reveals that the details of the Lind family story changed each time it was told, and she wanted to change it as well; she also wanted to tell the story through the perspective of a foreigner in order to "illustrate the situation faced by an emerging Creole class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time when an awareness of a distinctly Puerto Rican culture was just beginning to appear"<sup>63</sup> (820-821). By utilizing Miss Florence's voice, Vega says, she as a writer is able to maintain a critical distance from the tumultuous cultural conditions of the time and offer a reflection on what she sees as the "terrible contradictions" of the era, without being controlled by them (821).

One of these contradictions for Vega was how the African root of Puerto Rican identity was on the one hand so crucial and elemental, and on the other continuously silenced and ignored. She reveals that for her generation,<sup>64</sup> although they had been brought up ignorant of their internal history and their African heritage, they "are the children of José Luis González and Isabelo Zenon" who "launched new views on our African roots" (qtd. in Hernández and López Springfield 824). Vega begins the search for

---

<sup>63</sup> Vega points out in her interview with Hernández and López Springfield that at this time in Puerto Rican history, three-quarters of the landowners in the southern region of the island were not only foreigners, but non-Spanish foreigners—British, Dutch, and Danish people who came not only from Europe but from around the Caribbean and had a large hand in controlling the local economy (821).

<sup>64</sup> Vega was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, in 1946.

these roots and this history in *Miss Florence's Trunk*, by exploring the role and treatment of slaves in colonial Puerto Rico; the sometimes forced and sometimes consensual miscegenation between master and slave; the taboos of interracial marriage; and the possibilities of a mixed-race world beyond the end of slavery.

As mentioned earlier in this section, one of González's most crucial arguments is that Puerto Rican culture, and hence Puerto Rican identity, is in essence Afro-Antillean, and that the influence of black Puerto Ricans on all members of society is pervasive and undeniable. Vega illustrates this claim through the character Charlie, the only member of the elite class in the novella who was native-born. Like many members of his class, Charlie was largely raised by black household servants and mammies, but Miss Florence reflects on an unusual closeness between Charlie and at least two of these women. Of Bella, the primary household slave, Miss Florence says she "shows him more affection than his own mother does" (170), and of Carolina, the slave who served as Charlie's wet nurse, Miss Florence observes that Charlie defies his mother's prohibitions to visit her when she is in poor health (185) and he mourns her openly when she passes away (222). Not only do Charlie's affections lie with these women of African descent, but as Miss Florence notes, the way he speaks Spanish "betrays the African origins of his school" (170) and his habit of swimming naked in the ocean reveals "his contact with the African children who have always been his playmates" (172). Despite Miss Susan's efforts to prevent, or at least limit her son's fraternization with their slaves, Charlie's character is deeply influenced by this contact.

While the African influence on Charlie's Spanish accent and child's games were certainly easy enough for his parents to ignore and dismiss, Charlie's attraction to mulatto women is presented as a much more serious issue, and eventually leads to his downfall. Miss Florence notes the absence of white girls Charlie's own age in their area and believes this fact explains what she sees as his unnatural attraction to older women; what Miss Florence does not see, at least not at first, is that Charlie *is* drawn to girls his own age, but they are not the young ladies she would assume he would love. The first is a young Creole (or mixed-race) woman named Carmelina, and although she is only a few years older than Charlie, Miss Florence describes her as "far from his equal not only in age but also (and above all) in condition" (222). While this romance does not progress further than the infatuation stage, as an adult Charlie falls in love with and proposes marriage to a mulatta named Brunilda who is the recognized daughter of one of the town's respected white patriarchs and a black servant girl. Brunilda is described by the Lind's former servant Bella as "olive-colored as a gypsy, and she had big eyes the color of honey, and a nose that looked like somebody had whittled it down, it was so fine and narrow" (247). Although her skin was light enough and her features looked European enough, what betrayed her origins was her kinky hair. Bella reveals to Miss Florence that Charlie's father Edward Lind was vehemently opposed to the match, because according to her, "Marrying a mulatto woman was not the same as sowing some wild oats with the negro girls" (247). Neither Charlie nor Mr. Lind would budge in their positions, however, and their standstill only ended with Charlie's tragic suicide.

What makes the argument between Charlie and his father even more tragic is that Mr. Lind would frequently indulge himself in the pleasures of his mulatta slaves. Miss Florence even witnessed Mr. Lind and his slave Selenia having sex on her bedroom floor, although she wasn't sure what it was she saw through the stupor brought on by the yellow fever she had contracted. It was clear enough what had occurred, however, when months later she is told by Charlie that Selenia is pregnant. Once Selenia's child is born, too, his patronage is clear enough in his light skin and green eyes that look just like Mr. Lind's. For Mr. Lind and men of his class, to father children by a mulatta was not against the rules, and in many ways was even encouraged, but to marry one was quite another story. As mentioned earlier, the "purity" of the white race in Puerto Rico was vigorously protected by the elite classes, and despite his own behaviors and Charlie's increasingly liberal attitudes, Mr. Lind was not about to let his only child betray the understood code of his class: that you may sleep with as many mulattas as you like, but you may not join them in marriage.

The great disparity between Charlie's views and Mr. Lind's views reflects the "terrible contradictions" mentioned by Vega in her interview. Mr. Lind represents the past and the dying plantation system that sought to protect itself at all costs, even at the loss of a child. This system must maintain a clear separation between whites and nonwhites, meaning anyone with an African heritage, if it is to survive. Charlie, however, represents the new and emerging Puerto Rican identity, one that is moving towards not only the acceptance of an African heritage, but the embracing of it. In a poignant letter that Charlie writes to Miss Florence while he is studying art in Paris, he recounts how a

French friend referred to him as Puerto Rican, and how he reacted to this claim as if it were the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard: “Puerto Rican? What does this new epithet mean, whose syllables never once assailed my ears in all the time I lived in Arroyo?” (236) For Vega, Charlie’s return to Puerto Rico from Europe and the “tragic tale of his love for a Creole mulatta” represents his “search for Puerto Rican roots” (qtd. in Hernández and López Springfield 822). He made a choice not to turn from his *puertorriqueñidad* but rather to embrace it, but, as Adán-Lifante points out, he ultimately had “to choose death over obedience and oppression” (17). In this way, his own rebellion in part reflects the slave rebellions his father and the other men in his class were trying to quell, many of which also ended in the tragic loss of life.

While Charlie’s story does not end happily, Vega at least leaves her readers with a sense of hope through the character of Andrés, who we can only assume is the illegitimate son Mr. Lind had with Selenia. Andrés, who at the end of the novella is living with Bella near the now crumbling old plantation, La Enriqueta, helps Miss Florence pay her respects at the graves of both Charlie and Miss Susan, and helps to nurse her through yet another fever, as his mother very nearly failed to do thirty years earlier. But unlike his mother, who represents the bleak and miserable past of slavery, Andrés seems to bring hope, not only to Miss Florence, but to the reader as well: “Those green eyes, powerful, and so odd in one so dark—what indelible tattooing did they leave upon my soul?” (257) In many ways, Andrés embodies the future called for by González: “I believe...in reconstructing forward...towards a future which, basing itself on the cultural tradition of the popular masses, will rediscover and redeem the essentially *Caribbean* nature of our

collective identity” (29). Although Andrés was born from the taboo union of a master and his slave, he has managed to emerge from the situation as an example of the positive possibilities of *mestizaje*.

As in Vega’s work, a primary concern in the oeuvre of writer Rosario Ferré is the often hidden Africanist presence in Puerto Rican life, culture, and history, and she most often takes the Puerto Rican Creole elite as her principal subject. Primarily known as the progenitor of the feminist movement in Puerto Rico, Ferré’s work goes beyond discussions of the concerns of women to encompass the myths of all *puertorriqueños*. In the preface to her short story collection *Sweet Diamond Dust*, Ferré refers to a common dream that exists amongst Puerto Rican exiles to return to the island, buy “their own little *finquita* in the mountains” and “grow green plantains for *tostones*” (vii). She acknowledges, however, that this dream is based largely on a myth of the island that Puerto Ricans “always dream about but never existed except for a privileged few, the landed aristocracy of the nineteenth century” (viii). Ferré focuses on the history of this aristocracy, and hiding behind each marriage, close by at each birth, and present within the walls of each crumbling mansion is the specter of *mestizaje*. For the Puerto Rican elite, the fear of losing the privilege that was afforded to them because of their whiteness was threatened by the reality of racial mixing all around them, and this fear often led them to take drastic measures to protect that privilege.

A recurring motif in Ferré’s fiction is that of the Bloodline Book, or the *Expediente de Sangre*. Again, this ledger was maintained by the Church to insure the racial purity of the ruling class. Jimenez Roman maintains that the Spanish used “lineage

as a means of controlling their colonies” and that “Anyone who was not a Spaniard, or could not claim some affiliation with ‘Spanish blood’ ... was, by definition, inferior and powerless” (12). In Ferré’s 1995 novel *The House on the Lagoon*, family history, and especially the purity of the Mendizabal line, is a major concern. As the narrator Isabel Monfort states, “Since colonial times, a clean lineage was worth a family’s weight in gold” (22), and this definitely proves to be true in her case. Although her family is not wealthy, their “clean” lineage prompts the matriarch of the Mendizabal line, Rebecca, to allow a marriage between Isabel and her favorite son, Quintín, despite any class prejudices she might have.

The same cannot be said for Quintín’s brother Ignacio, however, who falls in love with a beautiful mulatta named Esmeralda. The daughter of a well-known lawyer in Ponce and his mistress Doña Ermelinda Quiñones, a famous dressmaker, Esmeralda is described as having her mother’s “light cinnamon skin” and her father’s “green eyes and fair hair, which fell in waves of honey over her dark shoulders” (223), but her light looks prove to not be enough to assuage Rebecca’s bigotry. Aware of their parents’ narrow-mindedness, Quintín still promises to help Ignacio in his courtship and invites Esmeralda and her mother over for a dinner party, one where Rebecca is also in attendance. When Doña Ermelinda enters the house with a turban on her head, however, Rebecca unkindly knocks it off, causing “the mat of corkscrew curls that grew on top of her head” (219) to pile out. As Ferré writes, “Several people began to laugh, pointing to the thick mat of hair that rose from her head, and some began to make unkind comments” (231). Needless to say, this is the end of Ignacio and Esmeralda’s relationship, and despite Ignacio’s

pleadings, Quintín tells him brutally, “You can’t go out with Esmeralda Márquez, because she’s part black. Father and mother will never stand for it” (232).

David Akbar Gilliam points out that the “turban [is a] long-time symbol of hidden racial identity” (58), and as such it allows the novelist “to explore the destructive potential of denying or repudiating a part of one’s personal or national identity, and the salutary effect of owning and embracing all aspects of one’s heritage” (60). The turban incident allows Esmeralda to later marry Ernesto Ustariz, a successful lawyer whose job, ironically, is to investigate cases of racial discrimination for the federal government; for Ignacio, however, the loss of Esmeralda not only breaks his heart and prevents him from ever falling in love again, but it eventually leads to his suicide five years after Esmeralda and Ernesto marry. Like Charlie in *Miss Florence’s Trunk*, Ignacio’s only escape from the racial hatred of his family is to take his own life.

The turban incident also leaves the door open for Quintín’s son Manuel to fall in love with Esmeralda’s daughter Coral, years later. Although at times he tries to conceal it, Quintín ultimately has the same prejudices as his mother; in a heated argument with Manuel he tells him he cannot marry Coral because his blood, which he demonstrates by dramatically cutting his finger, “doesn’t have a drop of Arab, Jewish, or black blood in it” (346), and Quintín would like to keep it that way. But unlike his uncle Ignacio, Manuel does not silently accept his fate and live a life of solitude and grief; he rejects his father’s judgment and leaves his family and his wealth to join the anti-bourgeois terrorist group AK 47, and he ultimately causes his father’s demise when he burns down the titular house on the lagoon at the end of the novel. Quintín’s fear, then, seems to be misdirected;

while it is his fear of racial mixing that causes him to prevent his son from marrying a mulatta, it is ironically through this action that he brings about his own ruin.

The fear of mixed marriages also surfaces in Ferré's 1998 novel *Eccentric Neighborhoods*. Proud of the fair looks of his children, the patriarch of the Rivas de Santillana family, Abuelo Alvaro, is adamant that everyone in the family "marry white." Ferré writes, "Marrying mixed blood was the one sure way of losing one's foothold on the already shaky social and economic ladder of Guayamés's plantation society. Even recent immigrants, therefore, were looked on more kindly than many of the local suitors" (19). Abuelo Alvaro's obsession with "bringing in 'good blood'" echoes the practices of elite families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who would marry their daughters off to poor but white Spaniards, mentioned earlier in this section. Jimenez Roman further emphasizes the point, remarking that for these wealthy but white families, "the titles of *Spanish* and *white* constitute in themselves an extensive property and an evident mark of nobility" (14). Evidently this was the case in the Rivas de Santillana household, where Tía Dido says to her suitor Antonio, "We love each other; why don't we get married? I'm sure Mother will like you because she likes Spaniards. Even if you have no money you're bound to make some one day because you're white and hardworking" (43). They do, of course, get married, and have one son together.

Unfortunately for the bourgeoisie of Puerto Rico, however, interracial marriages could not always be avoided, but when this was the case they were certainly not celebrated or flaunted. Ferré's short story "Sweet Diamond Dust" relays the testimony of the dying Doña Laura who spills the secret of her husband Ubaldino's family, the De La

Valles; although his mother Elvira's family claimed to be proud descendants of the daughters of El Cid,<sup>65</sup> the De La Valle clan sent her away to the country, away from the prying eyes of Guamaní society, when she married Don Julio Font. The reason for this was never clear to Laura, who had believed the myth that "Don Julio was a dangerously handsome man, with skin white as milk and cruel golden eyes speckled with green" (73). The truth, she later discovers, is that Don Julio was dark-skinned, and it suddenly makes sense to Laura why she could never find a single portrait of her husband's late father. Ferré writes, "the refined Doña Elvira, educated in Paris amid silk cushions, had married a black man!" (74) Doña Laura realizes, too, that this "was the explanation why our poor daughters had always been snubbed in Guamaní's parties, because they had forbidden their cavalier sons to dance with them, and had warned them not to fall in love with quarteroons" (74).

Unlike many of her caste, however, Doña Laura was savvy enough to realize that the idea of a pure lineage in Puerto Rico was increasingly foolish, and as she so smartly phrased it, "greenbacks are the only family tree that still stands in Guamaní" (74). Indeed, Jimenez Roman claims that in the absence of a racially pure lineage, the *criollos* would substitute "education and training, available exclusively to the wealthy" to reinforce "the notion of their superiority over the lower castes while simultaneously establishing their capacity to rule" (14).

This battle between racial purity and economic viability finds a voice in Ferré's short story "The Gift," where Carlotta Rodriguez becomes the first mulatto student to be admitted to the exclusive Sacred Heart school in Santa Cruz, due to the school's

---

<sup>65</sup> El Cid was an 11<sup>th</sup> Century Castilian nobleman and remains a famous figure in Spanish history.

“economic needs” (94). Although her father Don Agapito Rodriguez’s considerable assets secure Carlotta admission to Sacred Heart, they neither stave off the prejudices of the old aristocratic families of her classmates, nor of the nuns who run the school. In addition, when it appears that Carlotta will become the first “truly Creole queen” (91) of carnival in Santa Cruz, at first she celebrates the triumph. She exclaims, “Before queens were always so pale and insipid. If Don Juan Ponce de León should have seen me he would have picked me. Spaniards always preferred swarthy girls” (91). What starts out as her advantage, however, soon becomes a liability. Carlotta’s brazen dress and unusual plans for carnival lead Mother Artigas, the principal of the school, to expel her. What the Mother views as vulgar, however, Carlotta views as in keeping with her heritage. Ferré writes:

Her features, shaded by thick layers of paint, acquired a grotesque aspect that...was in character with the savage nature of the mestizo women with whom Juan Ponce de León probably fell in love. It was because she was their direct descendant that she painted her face with burnt coal, corozo nut oil, and the juice of the achiote seed, to test the courage of those not yet respectful of the island’s way of life. She had piled her hair on top of her head in a wild cathedral of curls and thus ambled absentmindedly among the students, adorned with bracelets and necklaces that jangled on her white organdy blouse with heretic dismay. (111)

It is Carlotta’s celebration of a non-white-centered *mestizaje*, then, that so offends Mother Artigas.

Arlene Torres points out that in Puerto Rico, “whiteness is associated with *la cultura*” and that “upward mobility cannot be achieved if a black identity is maintained because there are negative cultural ascriptions associated with blackness” (297).

Carlotta’s transgression, then, is that she does not hide her blackness but instead

celebrates it. Her audacity infuriates Mother Artigas who accosts Carlotta with a pair of scissors and begins to furiously cut off her curls. Ferré writes:

[Mother Artigas] was screaming the dirtiest swear words [Merceditas] had ever heard in her life, such as “Just who do you think you are, you filthy nigger, you’re not good enough to be one of the convent’s cooks and you want to be carnival queen, stuck up on your throne like a mud-smearred blackamoor, like the glorified idol of the rabble’s most vulgar dreams!” (117)

While Mother Artigas’s reaction may seem exaggerated, as Pérez y González points out, “Anything that deviated ever so slightly from what the Spaniards deemed worthy of respect—including their standards of beauty and their cultural expressions—was labeled abnormal, ugly, bad, and devoid of any redeeming quality or value” (111-112). Carlotta, then, represents a deviation, not only through her behavior but through her very being. For Mother Artigas, Carlotta symbolizes the impurity of the “rabble,” the greatest fears of the keepers of the Bloodline Books turned into flesh.

While Carlotta represents the fear of blackness held by the elite, she also demonstrates the pride in both the indigenous and African components of Puerto Rican identity. The character of Petra Avilés in *The House on the Lagoon* also demonstrates this pride. The long-time servant of the Mendizabals, Petra is described as “six feet tall and her skin wasn’t a watered-down chocolate but a deep onyx black” (58). She is the descendant of a tribal chieftain from Angola and works hard to maintain a semblance of her African beliefs (a connection to the African deities Yemayá, Ogún, and Elegguá) and language (Bantu); she also maintains the bearing of a person of her royal rank and she strikes an imposing figure throughout the text. Unlike so many black characters in Puerto

Rican literature, who are presented as ashamed of their darkness, Petra recognizes the beauty of her color, and the beauty of her great-granddaughter Carmelina. When she is first presented with Carmelina, the child's mother Alwilda apologizes for her dark skin, but Petra thought Carmelina "was a beautiful baby—as black as ebony," and she tells Alwilda, "She looks just like I did when I was a child...when my color was still African black, and not watered down by age" (243). Remembering that Carmelina, too, is the descendant of African royalty, Petra will not let Alwilda put her on the floor but rather treats her with the respect she is due.

Where Petra sees the royal descendant of an important chieftain, however, her mistress Rebecca Mendizabal sees "a black Kewpie doll" whose purpose is to entertain her daughters Patria and Libertad (244). After tiring of playing with their "black doll" after a week, the bored Patria and Libertad decide to paint Carmelina white to see how she looks, and the lead in the paint they use nearly kills her. Thankfully, Rebecca and Petra are able to get Carmelina to the emergency room in time to remove the paint, but "Another half an hour of being white, and Carmelina would have died" (245). Although typically blackness is presented as something for the elite class to fear, in this instance whiteness poses the real danger.

While the whiteness of the Puerto Rican elites poses a danger for those who are clearly not white, or those whose racial "purity" is in question, this whiteness that they hold so dear is called into question when the island becomes a colony of the United States. And just as Spanish constructions of race found their way across the ocean from east to west, North American conceptions of race found their way from north to south. As

early as 1899, written colonial reports on the racial makeup of the island were sent back to the United States, claiming that Puerto Rico was mostly comprised of whites or light mulattos and that the African component of society was “essentially confined ‘to a colony at one end of the island’” (Jimenez Roman 15). Photographic evidence, however, countered these arguments and Puerto Rico was apparently not white enough to garner statehood or independent civil government. Many moves were undertaken by interested parties to counter the perception of Puerto Rico as anything but white, including encouraging immigration for whites and forbidding it for blacks, with the underlying impetus being to make the island attractive to the Americans.

Here, then, is where Ferré’s aristocracy finds itself in trouble. Once they were granted American citizenship, many rich Puerto Ricans made trips to the mainland; many were surprised to see segregation first hand and to be victims of racial discrimination themselves for the first time. In *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré writes, “The concept of equality under law, which the new democratic regime supposedly had brought to the island and which they had so earnestly embraced because they wanted to be good American citizens, was interpreted very differently on the mainland” (25). Although they considered themselves to be Caucasian, their skin was not quite as white as that of the Americans; Ferré says, “it had a light olive tint to it, which made them suspect in the eyes of the conductor when they were about to board the first-class coaches to New Orleans, for example” (25). Rather than acknowledge and embrace the quite progressive attitudes towards race relations that existed in Puerto Rico at the time, Ferré’s bourgeois families

instead found reprieve in the old Bloodline Books and seemed more determined than ever to engage in practices that would “lighten” their culture.

Ferré’s work has been criticized for her treatment of racial issues, in part because she writes from the perspective of the white elite of which she is a member. *The House on the Lagoon*, for instance, is largely written in the voice of the white Isabel Mendizabal, who spends considerable time reminding the reader that her racial identity is not in question. Writer, scholar, and film-maker Frances Negrón-Muntaner charges that in this novel in particular, Ferré “represents the value of racial purity as a social fact, not a construct” and by doing so she “reinscribes the supreme value of whiteness over racialized subjects” (*Boricua Pop* 195). Mary Ann Gosser Esquilín, however, claims that the presence of marginalized black characters in Ferré’s fiction “remains problematic precisely because they still represent what is going on in contemporary Puerto Rican society” (52). She praises Ferré for giving a voice to the Afro-Caribbean women who are usually silenced or presented merely as bodies, either for domestic or sexual service. Suzanne Bost, too, argues that “However ambivalent some of her characters may be, Ferré decenters the dominant culture of Puerto Rico by exposing its complicity with the margins, a move that is especially radical because it comes from a writer who inhabits that center” (110). Indeed, regardless of her personal standpoint, Ferré’s work explores and exposes a history that is full of racial fear, not a history that would portend the “racial paradise” that contemporary Puerto Rico thinks itself to be.

While both Vega’s and Ferré’s work may be seen as first steps towards giving a literary voice to Afro-Puerto Rican women, the work of writer Mayra Santos-Febres

takes an even greater step in this regard. Unlike Vega and Ferré, who write about the history of Puerto Rico from the perspective of the white elite, the main characters in Santos-Febres' work are black Puerto Ricans who must negotiate the complicated constructions of race around them that on the one hand keep them at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale because of their color, and on the other deny that racism even exists on the island. When asked in an interview what she has in common with contemporary Puerto Rican women writers, including Vega and Ferré, Santos-Febres responded that aside from a shared preoccupation with writing about Puerto Rico and about gender issues, "I don't think that our work is similar at all... There is one thing, though, that sets me apart from all the other writers: I am black. My take on race as a literary theme goes beyond its use as a trope or symbol of nationhood" (qtd. in Birmingham-Pokorny 453). Indeed, in both her novels and her short stories, Santos-Febres emphasizes the subjectivity of black Puerto Ricans; their perspectives and experiences are what drive her work, not what serves as a backdrop for the activities of an upper class mortally afraid of the taint of an African heritage.

The notorious brothel owner Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, better known as Isabel "La Negra," serves as the heroine in Santos-Febres' 2006 novel *Our Lady of the Night*. An infamous figure in twentieth-century Puerto Rican lore, not much is known about the personal life of *La Negra*, but Santos-Febres' novel is not the first time she has been fictionalized in Puerto Rican literature. Ferré wrote her 1976 short story "When Women

Love Men”<sup>66</sup> about *La Negra* who was a well-known personality in the town of Ponce where Ferré grew up. Ferré’s intention in writing this story, as she explains in her essay “How I Wrote ‘When Women Love Men,’” was to explore the specific social problems of “the frigidity of women of the higher social class as well as the sexual exploitation of prostitutes” and how these problems stemmed from “an unjust hegemony in the hands of men” (151). Aside from a few brief references to color, however, Ferré’s text does not explore the role that race plays in these social problems: namely, how closely aligned the frigidity of the upper classes is with whiteness and the perceived sexual promiscuity of the lower classes is with blackness. In *Our Lady of the Night*, however, Santos-Febres tackles the issue of classism as a cover for racism; assumptions about the purity of whiteness and the stain of blackness; and the problematic and promising legacies of miscegenation.

By writing *La Negra*’s story in the form of a novel, Santos-Febres allows herself the freedom to fully explore the Madame’s origins, when *La Negra* was still simply Isabel Luberza. Abandoned by her mother, a black Englishwoman who migrated to Puerto Rico to cut sugarcane, Isabel was raised with several other abandoned children by a godmother named Maruca Moreno, a washerwoman. Wishing more for her life than taking in the laundry of others, Maruca brings a young Isabel to work as a domestic servant in the Tous home with the caveat that Doña Gina Tous pay for Isabel’s education while she works in their home. It is within the Tous home that Isabel first learns the power of whiteness and resolves to never let herself be subjugated to it. Although she has

---

<sup>66</sup> This story originally appeared in Ferré’s short story collection *Papeles de Pandora* as “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” and was translated as “When Women Love Men” in the collection’s 1991 translation, *The Youngest Doll*.

always seen her Godmother as a formidable force, when Maruca first brings Isabel to the Tous home she is amazed at how, despite her diminutive physical stature, Doña Gina's authority as a white woman manages to shrink and silence her Godmother "irremediably before Isabel's eyes" (52). From the beginning of her employment with the Tous family, Isabel maintains a subversive agenda, refusing to avert her eyes when she is being spoken to and asserting an air of superiority around the Tous daughter Virginia, an obese and moronic girl whose only redeeming qualities seem to be her whiteness and her wealth. Indeed, when Virginia commands Isabel to let go of her debutante dress because she fears she will "soil it with those sooty hands," Isabel thinks to herself, "Me and you, equals now, you imbecile...I'm better than you, you flabby seal. Even your father knows it. I'm stronger, tougher; you are worthless, ungrateful, useless" (94). Despite frequent references throughout the novel to her inferiority because of her darkness, Isabel refuses to give in to the assumed superiority of both whiteness and the ruling class.

Isabel's continual defiance of the white social norms of the elite echoes the actions and attitudes of Ferré's character Carlotta in "The Gift." Like Carlotta, Isabel does not hide from her blackness but rather celebrates it and does not see it as a hindrance to achieving her goal of upward mobility. One of Santos-Febres' first descriptions of Isabel reads: "Her skin was blue, panther blue, blue like the shadow of a hungry eye...Her skin was so glossy that it was difficult to believe it was skin...She also knew that her skin was a temptation and that a mere gaze at it would impress anyone" (26). Isabel learns to channel the power of her darkness towards achieving what she wants and, ironically, it is largely through the vices of white society that she is able to escape the

subservient fate of her Godmother Maruca and secure her social and financial position in the community. First, she turns her dismissal from the Tous household (after Doña Gina catches her husband Don Aurelio nearly raping her) into the chance to remake herself as a sought-after seamstress. Then, she seizes the opportunity to start a successful bootlegging business during prohibition, from which she makes the money necessary to start Elizabeth's Dancing Club, her bar and brothel that is frequented by not only the working men in the area, but the elite male members of high society as well. Through her contacts with these powerful men and through generous donations to local politicians and the Church, Isabel overcomes the stigma of her skin to become a powerful figure in the local community.

Although Isabel's rise from an impoverished orphan to a commanding member of the community is extraordinary, her financial and social achievements are not quite enough to gain her legitimate acceptance by the white elite. The novel opens with a scene where Isabel emerges from the Cadillac of a prominent attorney to attend a society event, to the surprised looks of both bellhops and belles alike. The politicians who patronize her brothel ignore her and their wives shun her, but for Isabel, "she was making her debut in the casino, on the other side of the river, dressed in silk and diamonds. She had come through the main entrance. No one had dared get in her way" (3). Guerra makes the point that Afro-Latin Americans who manage to climb the social ladder towards cultural whiteness, through material or political means, "continue to be seen by fellow members of the elite as *essentially black*" (217), and this is certainly the case for Isabel. However, one of the requirements for acceptance by the elite is to turn away from blackness, a

move that Isabel continuously refuses to make. By portraying Isabel *La Negra* as a strong black woman who refuses to compromise or alter her identity for the white elite, Santos-Febres criticizes the hypocrisy of Puerto Rican society, which claims to value both its African and Spanish heritages, but relentlessly devalues blackness and upholds a white cultural standard. As Quiñones Rivera argues, “Blackness is seldom acknowledged, praised, or used as a concept to empower people on the island” (167), but Isabel turns this notion on its head.

Isabel’s refusal to be a victim of her society is in sharp contrast to the character of Cristina Rangel Fornarís, the legitimate wife of Isabel’s erstwhile lover, the lawyer Fernando Fornarís. In many ways, it is Fernando’s rejection of Isabel for the white Cristina that forces her to become the powerful woman she does, but the knowledge that her husband not only had an affair with Isabel, but fathered a child with her, drives Cristina to insanity. In reference to her own work, Ana Lydia Vega has remarked that the patriarchal history of Puerto Rico made conditions terrible for all women, including white women: “Black women were raped and impregnated by patriarchs. ‘Traditional’ women suffered constant betrayal in terms of men’s promiscuity with enslaved Africans. They were all prisoners” (qtd. in Hernández and López Springfield 821). Although Isabel and Fernando’s relationship was consensual and not forced, Vega’s reflection still adequately describes Cristina’s situation: she suffered through the knowledge of her husband’s betrayal and allowed herself to become a victim of her own circumstances.

The prose in the chapters where we hear Cristina’s voice is written in the form of a supplication to the Virgin Mary and that voice is disjointed and fragmented, reflecting

her disturbed mental state. She displays an unsettling obsession with her own purity, which she equates with her lightness, and which she contrasts with Isabel's darkness: she claims, "I was pure and pale like you, Mother" (106), but imagines that Isabel "bears on her skin the stain of the cauldron that burns the sins of man" (110). She laments that the Virgin would allow her husband to father a mixed-race child: "How did you allow this? Why did you let me become the Displaced One? I, the child of your sorrow, the image of your likeness, pale and Immaculate like you" (108). Cristina's anxiety here harkens back to Williams' notion of the white social anxiety associated with the perceived sexual dominance of the black woman (71). For Cristina, Isabel serves as a threat not only because she is the *other* woman, but because she is a *black* woman. Cristina feels cheated because her pale skin and light hair fail to attract her husband sexually; she feels cheated out of what she imagines her whiteness entitles her to. She blames Isabel, calling her "the real Sinner" (217), but wonders what her own transgression is: "But what was my error, my stigma? I was conceived to be snow-like, dawn-colored. I don't even know why, but you punished me" (215). In many ways, however, both Isabel and Cristina are victims of the broken promises of their society and of the myth of Puerto Rican racial harmony. Fernando married the white Cristina, despite being in love with the black Isabel, because that was what was expected of a man of his social standing; Cristina finds that her whiteness is worthless currency when it comes to matters of the heart; and Isabel finds herself being unfairly blamed as the instigator and perpetrator of Cristina's unhappiness, despite the depths of her own suffering.

Although they may be the most visible victims of Puerto Rican racial anxiety, the women in Santos-Febres' novel are not the only victims. Cristina and Fernando's son Luis Arsenio Fornarís experiences his own existential race crisis, first through his feelings of guilt and confusion after losing his virginity to a mulatta prostitute named Minerva at Elizabeth's. After this experience he finds himself haunted by a recurring dream of being consumed by a black woman's sexuality; Luis Arsenio is powerless to resist the temptation that is for him both pleasurable and shaming. In a perhaps subconscious effort to abandon his obsession with Minerva, Luis Arsenio chooses to pursue her opposite while attending university in Pennsylvania, a very white American girl named Maggie Carlisle. Maggie's alabaster skin and red hair is presented in the text as a different kind of whiteness, the kind that should be prized: "It wasn't the dark-haired fairness common with women of his class or the anemic paleness of the country girls. Her skin was translucent; something like mother of pearl shone from under the indirectly glowing skin" (152). Because of this difference, and because he views her as a "decent girl," Luis Arsenio stops himself when he begins to have impure thoughts about her: "You don't think those things about such refined girls" (153).

For Luis Arsenio, Maggie embodies the Puerto Rican imperative to "*mejorar la raza*" by marrying white. He sees her not only as his entitlement, but also as his savior. During a brief visit to the island to attend to his ailing mother, Luis Arsenio imagines returning to Maggie to "lay claim to what was his. He would take Maggie to see the world and then return with his pale, redheaded princess to fill a position of prominence within his clan" (227). At the same time, he imagines that Maggie "would finally erase

the memories of Minerva, the dream, the stain from his treasonous body” (230). While he justifies his involvement with Minerva by referring to her as “an ancient rite of passage” for someone of his class (233), it is Maggie and her whiteness that he truly seeks as he imagines it will secure his position in society even further.

Unfortunately for Luis Arsenio, Maggie does not reciprocate his feelings. Despite what he sees as his aristocratic heritage, which he imagines makes him Maggie’s equal, for her he is simply “Louie Forneress,” the anglicized version of his name that is used in the United States and which effectively erases his impressive lineage. For Maggie, “Louie” is an exotic Other who is fine to have a fling with, but not the kind of man you would bring home to your parents. Duany argues that for many Americans, “Puerto Ricans occupy an ambiguous position between white people and people of color” and their portrait of Puerto Rican racial identity is incompatible with the views that Puerto Ricans have of themselves (*Puerto Rican Nation* 239); this accurately describes Maggie’s feelings towards Luis Arsenio. When Luis Arsenio returns to Pennsylvania to “claim his prize,” he finds that Maggie has moved on to a new boyfriend, a “tall, blond, distinguished” young man (237). When he confronts her about her new beau, she acts surprised that he believed they were a “real couple” and she cruelly relays her own imaginings of their relationship:

“And it doesn’t mean anything. Besides, how was I going to introduce you to my family? ‘Hi, this is Louie Forneress from some island. I don’t know his parents. I don’t know if he has the means to support me. We want to get married and live in the jungle, in a tree with the monkeys. He is not as tall as Johnny Weismuller, but... ‘Me, Jane, you Tarzan.’”” (239)

Shocked by her view of him as some kind of jungle native, Luis Arsenio retreats from Maggie's callous rejection of him not with sadness, but rather with shame.

Luis Arsenio's shame does not last for long, however. By being forced to see himself through Maggie's eyes, he is eventually able to accept his identity as an integral part of Puerto Rican society, a society that is not necessarily bound by the constraints of North American definitions of race. Negrón-Muntaner argues that it is through the loss of racial privilege in the United States that many white Puerto Ricans may let go of their racial prejudices on the island: "Becoming aware of race as a structuring category, and being routinely identified with 'people of color,' breaks the spell cast by the discourse of racial democracy in Puerto Rico" ("When I Was a Puerto Rican Lesbian," 519). Through this experience, Luis Arsenio is able to confront the figure in his nightmares, which in many ways is just his fear of himself; he realizes he no longer needs to fear the black woman in his dreams and he need not be ashamed of where he comes from.

Through the character of Luis Arsenio, Santos-Febres points towards a possible future where the myth of Puerto Rican racial harmony may become more than mere rhetoric, and this happens in part through his chance encounter with his half-brother Roberto, the son of his father and Isabel *La Negra*. Although the brothers did not know about each other before they happened to meet while serving together in the military, for both of them it is as if they are looking at themselves in a negative: they see their own image, only it is transformed into either black or white. The brothers come together towards the end of the novel, as both business partners and pall bearers at Isabel *La Negra*'s funeral, where they are described as "Two strong arms, one white and one black,

carrying the coffin at the same time” (355). Their unity suggests that just as their individual prejudices may change over time, so might their culture’s collective prejudice.

### **Writing From the Mainland: Race and Color in the Puerto Rican Diaspora**

As previously mentioned, nearly half of Puerto Ricans today do not live on the island but rather are part of the vast Puerto Rican diaspora in the mainland United States. In her essay “When I Was a Puerto Rican Lesbian,” Negrón-Muntaner claims that despite their geographic displacement, the diaspora takes “the nation with it, modularly reproducing it as a partially deterritorialized ethnic formation” (516). In this way, she argues, many Puerto Ricans in the United States have not really left the island, but have merely “extended the borders of what we can now call the ‘Puerto Rican archipelago,’ a chain that includes Vieques, Manhattan, Chicago, Hawaii, and Lorain, Ohio” (516). In addition to maintaining their national and cultural identity in the United States, many Puerto Rican migrants attempt to maintain their sense of racial identity, but as Landale and Oropesa argue, “One of the many adjustments required of Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland is finding their place in the U.S. system of race relations” where they face pressure to abandon the color-continuum schema they are used to and define themselves within the U.S. binary system that requires they identify as either white or black (234). A common reaction to this pressure is to reject the U.S. racial dichotomy all together and identify themselves by their nationality, as Puerto Ricans; by their pan-ethnic identity, as Latinos/as or Hispanics; or to choose the vague classification “other” when they must choose something.

There are several compelling reasons for Puerto Rican migrants' rejection of North American constructions of race. By accepting the United States' black-white dichotomy, and with it the "one-drop" rule, most Puerto Ricans would be required to define themselves as "black" because of their African heritage; with this definition they would be forced to take on what they see as the burden of discrimination that African Americans have had (and continue) to bear. Especially for Puerto Ricans whose skin tone falls into one of the many categories between white and black, this would mean losing "their intermediate status in a white/nonwhite dichotomy" (Duany, *Puerto Rican Nation* 244), and with it any skin privilege they may have enjoyed on the island. For those whose skin tone falls onto the darker end of the spectrum, choosing a Hispanic identity over a black identity on the mainland in many ways allows them to reinforce their Puerto Ricanness, something that may have been questioned on the island. In her first-person exploration of her own ethnic identity, Yarma Velázquez Vargas contends that although she was discriminated against on the island for her skin tone that was as dark as charcoal, by claiming a Hispanic identity in the United States, she could finally become what she wanted to be: "Ironically in a culture so divided by gender and race, I became what I always strived for. I became Puerto Rican. It was in the United States that I became a swan, an 'exotic' woman. I was Puerto Rican plain and simple. There were no categories of color" (951).

Like many Puerto Ricans on the mainland, however, Velázquez Vargas learns that although adopting the label "Hispanic" may have seemed like a solution to her racial problems, "it turned out to be a loaded term that ignores my cultural complexities and

incorporates other forms of discrimination” (952). Indeed, as Ramón Grosfoguel argues, despite the shade of a person’s skin,

the moment that person identifies her- or himself as Puerto Rican, she or he enters the labyrinth of Otherness. Puerto Ricans of all colors have become a racialized group in the social imaginary of Euro-Americans, marked by racist stereotypes such as laziness, violence, criminal behavior, stupidity, and dirtiness. (165)

It is clear, then, that like any racial and ethnic minority in the United States, mainland Puerto Ricans must negotiate a complicated terrain of discriminatory assumptions and harmful labeling, regardless of the views they have of themselves, both as individuals and as a community.

These and other issues are explored in the works of mainland Puerto Rican writers Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Piri Thomas, and Edgardo Vega Yunque. While the issues of race and color are not overtly treated in the works of Santiago and Ortiz Cofer, both writers address the question of what it means to be a Puerto Rican, both on and off the island, and both ethnically and racially, in subtle ways. Thomas and Vega Yunque, however, tackle the issue of racial identity head-on, through the exploration of what it means to be a black Puerto Rican in the United States and by challenging the racial and color prejudice within the Puerto Rican diaspora community, respectively.

Esmeralda Santiago’s moving 1993 memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* has become a core feature in the canon of contemporary Latino/a literature. The text chronicles Santiago’s young life in both rural and urban Puerto Rico and her migration to the United States with her family in 1961, when Santiago was only 13 years old. In an interview with Bridget Kevane, Santiago reveals that one of her intentions in writing this

text was to address the ever-present questions of who is really Puerto Rican and can the Puerto Rican identity include those living in the diaspora? Her choice to title her memoir in the past tense is in part a reaction to the harsh reception she received when she first returned to the island after twelve years in the United States, when “Boricuas on the island told me I was no longer Puerto Rican because I had lived afuera for so long. I didn’t feel welcome” (131). Santiago vigorously defends her Puerto Ricanness, however, and challenges her detractors to “Read this book. Tell me this is not a Puerto Rican experience” (131).

Although her primary purpose is not to examine the inner-workings of the system of racial stratification in Puerto Rico, Santiago’s memoir does reveal some of the commonplace attitudes towards race and color in Puerto Rican society. To begin with, Santiago’s family nickname “Negi” is a shortened version of “*Negrita*,” a term that is commonly used in Puerto Rico as an expression of love and endearment. Pérez y González contends that *negrita* “refers to anyone who is loved, regardless of the color of his/her skin” (116), although in Santiago’s case her mother tells her she is called Negi because ““when you were little you were so black, my mother said you were a *negrita*”” (13). Santiago responds to this answer by asking her mother if this means she is black, but rather than give her a definite answer, her mother simply says, ““It’s a sweet name because we love you, *Negrita*”” (13). Quiñones Rivera acknowledges that terms of endearment like *negrita* are intended to be expressions of honor and respect, but she also challenges this notion and argues that when these terms are assigned to dark-skinned women, their use “is another way of objectifying the Black body” (168). While Santiago

does not imply that it was her mother's or grandmother's intention to objectify her, their choice of nickname based on the color she was when she was born does reflect a cultural attention to shade that both marks and minimizes blackness. Santiago's mother's refusal to answer whether or not she is black also reflects the tendency of Puerto Ricans to "not view themselves as strictly Black," regardless of their "ancestral makeup" (Quiñones Rivera 168).

Indeed, Santiago's family represents the typical Puerto Rican mixed racial heritage, and she makes particular note of the variety of skin and hair colors and phenotypic features within her immediate family. Her sister Delsa has "black curly hair," "a heart-shaped face with tiny pouty lips," and "nutty brown" skin (13). Her sister Norma is nicknamed "La Colorá,"<sup>67</sup> or the red girl, because she has hair "the color of clay...and her skin glowed the same color as the inside of a yam" (13). Her mother is identified as the lightest member of the family with "pink" skin, and her father has *pasita*, or "raisined" hair (13), carob-colored skin and full lips (26). Gordon indicates that it is not unusual for there to be significant racial variations within immediate families, but often this variation leads to intra-familial color prejudice and "prestige-stratification by color" (390).

While Santiago does not indicate whether or not there was any color-bias within her own family, she does address the issue of class-bias through the familiar figure of the *jíbaro*, and in Puerto Rico as elsewhere, issues of class are often inextricably linked with issues of race. The *jíbaros* in Santiago's text are not like the sanctioned nationalist symbols examined in Roy-Féquièrre's text—the noble and white peasant descendants of

---

<sup>67</sup> One of the commonly used racial descriptors mentioned in the introduction to this section.

Spanish *hidalgos*; rather, the label *jíbaro* applies to anyone living in the country, regardless of color. Santiago mentions the figure of Don Berto, her friend Juanita's grandfather. He is described as having "skin...so black and wrinkled that it seemed to absorb light into its crevices," and he is remembered for telling the children "*jíbaro* tales of phantasms, talking animals, and enchanted guava trees" (49). She also claims that within her own racially mixed family her grandparents "were said to be *jíbaros*" (13). Santiago's recollections demonstrate that despite the Puerto Rican elite's attempts to define the *jíbaro* as the pure white descendant of Spaniards, in popular discourse the *jíbaro* more closely resembled the racial makeup of the island, a *jíbaro* more in line with the view of the populace presented by González.

Santiago's experiences not only indicate that real *jíbaros* were not always white, but she also indicates that they were not always revered cultural figures, as the Puerto Rican elite would have us believe. Inspired by the traditional songs and poems they heard on the radio, as children Santiago and her siblings wanted nothing more than to be *jíbaros*, whose struggles and hardships "were rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism" (12). Their mother, however, deeply discouraged their desire to be *jíbaros*, claiming that *jíbaros* were "mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect" and she warned them that calling someone a *jíbaro* was an insult (12). When their family moves from the rural Macún to the urban Santurce, Santiago herself is derisively labeled a *jíbara* because of her "wildness, [her] loud voice, and large gestures better suited to the expansive countryside but out of place in concrete

rooms” (39). Santiago comments that, ironically, in Santurce she had become the *jíbara* she had always wanted to be in Macún, but rather than being a source of pride the term became a source of shame. She learns first-hand the hypocrisy in her culture that celebrates the *jíbaro* as a national figure but also denigrates those who may be considered *jíbaros* in actuality.

On the eve of her migration to the United States, Santiago remarks, “For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting” (209). The final quarter of *When I Was Puerto Rican* chronicles her experiences in the United States as a hybrid individual, attempting to negotiate new customs, a new language, and new expectations of herself, from both within and without her family and community.<sup>68</sup> Santiago must also learn to exist within a new racial and ethnic hierarchy that not only includes Puerto Ricans, but Jews, Italians, and American *morenos*,<sup>69</sup> who Santiago quickly learns “were black, but they didn’t look like Puerto Rican *negros*...they lived in their own neighborhoods, frequented their own restaurants, and didn’t like Puerto Ricans” (225). Duany argues that because of their skin color, many mainland Puerto Ricans “are often lumped together with blacks” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 244), but these same Puerto Ricans “tend to reject their labeling as black, because that would mean accepting an inferior position within American society” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 254). The self-imposed segregation between the Puerto Rican and African American communities that Santiago observes reflects this

---

<sup>68</sup> Santiago more fully explores her experiences in the United States in her 1998 memoir *Almost a Woman*.

<sup>69</sup> i.e. African Americans.

tendency, but for Santiago the practice seems counterintuitive. She wonders why American *morenos* don't like Puerto Ricans, "since in Puerto Rico, all of the people I'd ever met were either black or had a black relative somewhere in their family. I would have thought *morenos* would like us, since so many of us looked like them" (225).

Santiago's mother explains that much of the animosity between the Puerto Rican and African American communities stems from the impression that Puerto Ricans are unfairly taking away jobs from African Americans. Ortiz Cofer confirms this impression in her essay "The Paterson Public Library," where she recounts being beaten up as a child by an angry black girl named Lorraine. Ortiz Cofer reflects that initially, like Santiago, she was unclear why and how so much "blind hatred of my person" could emanate from Lorraine (132), who hostilely addressed her as "*You little spic*" (131). As she grew older, however, Ortiz Cofer remarks:

It would be many years before I learned about the politics of race, before I internalized the awful reality of the struggle for territory that underscored the lives of blacks and Puerto Ricans in Paterson during my childhood. Each job given to a light-skinned Hispanic was one less job for a black man; every apartment leased to a Puerto Rican family was one less place available to blacks. (132)

Despite any prejudice Ortiz Cofer may experience because of her Puerto Rican ethnicity, she makes a clear distinction between herself and the black Lorraine, "whose skin color alone put her in a pigeonhole she felt she had to fight her way out of every day of her life" (133). It goes without saying that a light-skinned Hispanic like Ortiz Cofer did not have to fight this same fight. Both Santiago and Ortiz Cofer fail to recognize, however,

that the Puerto Rican rejection of the label “black” contributes greatly to their separation from African Americans, thus fueling the animosity between the two communities.

Like Santiago, Ortiz Cofer is one of the major figures in mainland Puerto Rican literature and her work is often required reading in Latino/a literature courses. She writes extensively of her experiences as a Puerto Rican living in the United States, including the Puerto Rican’s navigation between languages, cultures, and customs and how they must deal with prejudice and discrimination from mainstream white American culture. More often than not, however, Ortiz Cofer’s work firmly entrenches Puerto Rican culture and identity within a Hispanic framework, and not as part of Afro-Antillean culture. What is noticeably missing from her oeuvre is any significant treatment of issues of race within the Puerto Rican community, either in terms of the color-continuum model employed on the island or the black-white dichotomy in place on the mainland. Ortiz Cofer does briefly touch on issues of skin color in her essay “The Story of My Body,” which opens with her statement, “I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States” (135). Ortiz Cofer explains that she was born to white parents and called *blanca* on the island, where she was frequently complimented for her pale skin color, but “In America, I am a person of color, obviously a Latina” (136). Her racial adjustment is not unusual, as supported by Salvador Vidal-Ortiz who says that “as many as 40 percent of Puerto Ricans identify...with a ‘browning’ of their identities in the U.S., and not with white or black” (188). Regardless of any light-skinned privilege Ortiz Cofer may have experienced on the island, her identification as a Puerto Rican on the

mainland in many ways unifies her experiences with those of dark-skinned Puerto Ricans.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps it is precisely because of the “browning” of Ortiz Cofer’s skin on the mainland that the trope of “brown” skin plays out so significantly in her 1989 novel *The Line of the Sun*. Set both on the island and in the United States, Ortiz Cofer’s novel is largely the story of the wild and adventurous Guzmán who is consistently described as having a distinctly indigenous look with skin that “was copper red like an Indian’s” (202). Duany contends that in recent years the Taíno root of Puerto Rican identity has been revitalized by Puerto Rican intellectuals in an effort to help “erase symbolically the racial and cultural presence of blacks in Puerto Rico” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 276). He argues that descriptions of Taínos in contemporary texts rarely fail to mention their skin color, which is described as either brown or “copperlike,” and other phenotypic features that distinguish them from Africans, such as hair texture and facial features (*Puerto Rican Nation* 269-270). Although it would not be fair to contend that Ortiz Cofer intends to “erase” the African root of Puerto Rican identity, it is curious that this root plays little if any role in her writing, while the Taíno root receives rather grand treatment, and she rarely offers a physical description of Guzmán without referring to his Indian roots.

In many ways, Ortiz Cofer’s decision to emphasize Taíno rather than African heritage in *The Line of the Sun* reflects what Irene López characterizes as “an unacknowledged racism among many Puerto Ricans who consider being ‘Indian’ more

---

<sup>70</sup> Ortiz Cofer’s oft-anthologized essay “The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María” in her collection *The Latin Deli* poignantly relays several of her experiences with being discriminated against for being Latina, although because these experiences have more to do with her ethnic identity than her racial identity, I chose not to include them in this section.

beautiful, or more authentic, than being Black, and, thus, often prefer to claim this over a Black identity” (164). The “dark” characters in Ortiz Cofer’s work are consistently presented with an Indian rather than an African heritage, and unlike in the works of Vega, Ferré, and Santos-Febres, her contrast between fair and dark is a contrast between Spanish and indigenous, not between Spanish and African. Duany makes the point that both rhetorically and in practice, the image of the Taíno is romanticized in Puerto Rican culture at the expense of the African element (*Puerto Rican Nation* 280), and this may be seen in Ortiz Cofer’s text. In a scene where Guzmán is hiding from the authorities amongst the fruit trees on a farm, he looks around him and dreamily imagines “how the original inhabitants of the Island, the Taino Indians, had led an easy life in an earthly paradise, subsisting on what the earth produced without too much effort, and on what the sea gave them” (134). His reverie is followed by another reminder that “he knew that in his veins ran some Taino blood” (134), emphasizing yet again the connection between Ortiz Cofer’s romantic hero and the romantic origins of the island.

This is not to say that there is no need to explore the island’s indigenous roots, but as Duany reveals, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture has recently undertaken numerous projects devoted to the study, collection, and display of pre-Columbian artifacts, while as of the early 2000s there was only one museum in Puerto Rico devoted to celebrating African heritage (*Puerto Rican Nation* 278). In other words, the need may be greater for writers with a voice as prominent as Ortiz Cofer’s to make discussions of the African root of the Puerto Rican tree more substantial in their work.

One writer who does deal extensively with the African root of Puerto Rican identity is Piri Thomas, whose dark complexion makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to hide his African heritage behind a Puerto Rican ethnic curtain. Duany remarks that because of their “racial heterogeneity, mainland Puerto Ricans are often lumped together with blacks,” and although immigrants with light skin, like Ortiz Cofer, are “sometimes called ‘white Puerto Ricans’ ...dark-skinned immigrants are often treated like African Americans” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 244). This is certainly the case with Thomas, who chronicles his struggle to understand his identity as a black Puerto Rican in 1940s America in his ground-breaking 1967 memoir *Down These Mean Streets*.

Considered a canonical writer of the Puerto Rican diaspora, Thomas’s work has had a profound influence on Latino literature as a whole. His most famous work, *Down These Mean Streets*, is described in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature* as “the first agonizing tale of the search for identity among conflicting cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic alternatives presented to Latinos in general and Afro-Hispanic peoples in the United States in particular” (Kanellos 1149). Indeed, Thomas’s text presents to readers one of the first accounts of the experience of Puerto Ricans living in the United States. In an interview with Lisa D. McGill Thomas claims, “I was one of the first Puerto Rican writers in the U.S. to write about the conditions we were living under. Other Puerto Ricans wrote, but they wrote about Puerto Rico and their home. I wrote about what was happening to us—or at least me—and the surroundings in those years” (181). What “happened” to Thomas in the United States included countless incidents of severe discrimination, from both within and without his family and community, due in

large part to the dark shade of his skin. Through his autobiographical character Piri, he relays struggles that are quite common for dark-skinned Puerto Ricans living within the United States' black-white racial dichotomy.

Like Esmeralda Santiago's family, Piri's family is a rainbow family; his brothers and sister take after his mother, who is light-skinned, and Piri takes after his father, who is dark-skinned. Although the entire family must endure ethnic discrimination because they are Puerto Rican, Piri must additionally endure racial discrimination because of his dark skin, and this discrimination not only comes from external sources, but also from within Piri's own family. In a reflection on his troubled relationship with his father, Piri muses about a "feeling" that exists between them: "*How come when we all play with you, I can't really enjoy it like the rest? How come when we all get hit for doing something wrong, I feel it the hardest? Maybe 'cause I'm the biggest, huh? Or maybe it's 'cause I'm the darkest in this family*" (22). Although Piri would like to believe that his father loves them all equally, his years of experience have led him to believe that his father loves him a bit less because of the dark shade of his skin. Angela Jorge claims that the denial of the existence of racism within the Puerto Rican community has resulted in an ambiguity within family and friend relationships. She argues that "the one overriding feeling generated by the ambiguity of the Puerto Rican community about color is that of guilt at having disgraced first the family and then the community by simply being black or darker than other members of the family" (181-182). Indeed, the tension Piri experiences with his father, which he attributes largely to his color, reflects his own sense of internal guilt

at having been born darker than his siblings, as if somehow he has betrayed or disappointed his family.

Initially, Piri's sense of guilt because of his color manifests itself as both self-hatred and hatred toward his brothers. As he sits on his old stoop in Spanish Harlem and looks at the variety of skin shades of the people walking by, he reflects on his position in the color continuum within his own family:

*I look like Poppa, I thought, we really favor each other. I wondered if it was too mean to hate your brothers a little for looking white like Momma. I felt my hair—thick, black, and wiry. Mentally I compared my hair with my brothers' hair. My face screwed up at the memory of the jillion tons of stickum hair oils splashed down in a vain attempt to make it like theirs. I felt my nose. "Shit, it ain't so flat," I said aloud. But mentally I measured it against my brothers', whose noses were sharp, straight, and placed neat-like in the middle of their paddy fair faces.*

*Why did this have to happen to me? Why couldn't I be born like them? I asked myself...I felt shame creep into me. It wasn't right to be ashamed of what one was. It was like hating Momma for the color she was and Poppa for the color he wasn't. (121)*

Piri's ambivalence about his feelings towards both his family members and himself represents the experience of many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans; he feels a sense of envy because his brothers and mother have light skin and European phenotypic features and he does not. He does, however, experience a sense of shame for feeling as he does, and it is this shame that serves as a catalyst for his racial self-awakening.

Unlike his family members, Piri cannot hide his African heritage behind his Puerto Rican ethnic identity. When his nationality is questioned by a group of Italian thugs, his claim to be a North American-born Puerto Rican is met with the response, "Ah...he's black enuff to be a nigger. Ain't that what you is, kid?" (24) Similarly, when

the Thomas family moves from Spanish Harlem to a majority white community on Long Island, Piri's claim to a Puerto Rican heritage is continuously met with incredulity from his predominately white classmates. For example, when he asks a white girl named Marcia to dance, she at first politely refuses him, but then behind his back complains to her friends, "Imagine the nerve of that black thing" (85), because Piri had the audacity to ask her to dance. Although one of her friends corrects Marcia and tells her Piri is Puerto Rican, she exclaims, "Ha—he's probably passing for Puerto Rican because he can't make it for white," and "There's no difference [between black and Puerto Rican]...He's still black" (86). Marcia's assertion that Piri's perceived racial identity trumps any claimed ethnic identity is in keeping with Grosfoguel's claim that the white social imaginary tends to "confuse" many Puerto Rican migrants with African-Americans because of the variety of skin colors within the Puerto Rican community: "The social construction of racial categories in the United States, where having 'one drop of black blood' is enough to be classified as 'black,' was a fertile ground for the initial classification of Puerto Ricans as African-Americans despite their effort to maintain an autonomous identity" (163). Indeed, Piri can shout it from the rooftops that he is Puerto Rican and not black, but eventually he must own up to the reactions of those around him. As Piri tells his mother, "I don't dig the blancos around here [Long Island], and they don't dig me 'cause I'm black to them." When she protests and claims that he is brown and not black, Piri replies, "Not to them, Moms..." (135). In this instance, the Puerto Rican system of racial classification that would qualify Piri as *trigueño* and not black does not hold up within the North American black-white binary system.

Piri's conflict with his family about their racial makeup, either actual or perceived, comes to a head in an argument with his brother José who takes offense that Piri begins to claim a racial association with Negroes. Not only does José put forth his Puerto Rican identity as proof he is not black, but he refers vehemently to his own light skin and hair color and European features to disassociate himself with an African heritage: "I ain't black, damn you! Look at my hair. It's almost blond. My eyes are blue, my nose is straight. My motherfuckin' lips are not like a baboon's ass. My skin is white. White, goddamit! White! Maybe Poppa's a little dark, but that's the Indian blood in him. He's got white blood in him" (144). José's protests coincide with Duany's claim that "According to Puerto Rican standards, they should be considered white if they have light skin color, thin lips, elongated noses, and straight hair" (*Puerto Rican Nation* 260). While Duany rightly maintains that neither the Puerto Rican color-continuum system nor the United States' "one-drop" rule can claim correctness or moral superiority over the other, Piri's reaction to his brother's outburst at least draws attention to his lived experiences as a dark-skinned Puerto Rican in America. He tells his brother, "You and James are like houses—painted white outside, and blacker'n a mother inside. An' I'm close to being like Poppa—trying to be white on both sides" (145). Although the lighter-skinned members of his family may try to hold on to their appearances as proof that they belong in the category of white, the American system of racial classification will not let them make such a claim, especially with Piri and his father as proof of their family's African heritage.

Piri also challenges the Puerto Rican imperative to *adelantar la raza* by marrying white with his claim that “Poppa thinks that marrying a white woman made him white. He’s wrong. It’s just another nigger marrying a white woman and making her as black as him. That’s the way the paddy looks at it. The Negro just stays black. Period” (145). Jorge indicates that a dark-skinned child can often signify a family’s failure to improve the race by marrying white: “She...has become the living proof of the guilt the family feels, and finally, the receiver of the family’s effort to transfer that guilty feeling to her” (184). It is reasonable to argue that much of the discomfort Piri feels within his own family stems from their own guilt and shame at having a dark-skinned son and brother. Indeed, after their argument about whether their family is black or white, Piri’s brother José “tried, through a swollen eye, not to look like he’d made a choice between a brother and a color” (149), but he in fact chooses to emphasize his own whiteness over aligning himself both with his brother Piri and his own African heritage.

Although José and Piri’s other light-skinned family members have more flexibility in claiming a white racial identity because of their appearance, Piri’s dark-skinned father does not, but he still fervidly claims a Puerto Rican identity and rejects any association with African Americans. He explains to Piri that, by choice, he has no American Negro friends, and at times he makes his accent heavier to appear “more of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was,” because he has noticed how the accent would afford him entry and acceptance into places where “a dark skin wasn’t supposed to be” (153). His explanation for his rejection of a black identity is simple: he “don’t like feeling to be a black man” (150) and he “wanted a value on me” (153), a

value that may be grudgingly afforded to a dark-skinned Puerto Rican, but certainly denied to an African American. Piri's father's attitude and behavior is commonplace among dark-skinned Puerto Rican migrants. Pérez y González argues that African Americans felt a cultural separation from dark-skinned Puerto Ricans who could be categorized as black because "they rejected the racial categorization and insisted that they were Puerto Rican" (117). This led to feelings of distrust between the communities, with African Americans believing that Puerto Ricans had sided "with whites and thereby were categorized as white" (117). Piri's father's choice to reject a black racial identity in favor of maintaining a Puerto Rican ethnic identity certainly causes Piri to distrust him, due in large part to the fact that Piri cannot understand why his father would want to be white given how the white world treats them.

Piri's feelings of rejection from his family and his manifested hatred of whites and white culture compel him to search for his own sense of identity in the black world. He tells his mother, "Maybe if I had come outta you with the same kinda color as them...maybe I wouldn't feel like I do" (149-150). William Luis makes the argument that "unlike his father, Piri seeks refuge in African American culture. He does so to defy society and his father's beliefs, and also to show racial solidarity with blacks" (33). Piri demonstrates this solidarity by travelling to the South with his African American friend Brew, who throughout the text serves as a kind of moral compass for Piri in his quest to understand his racial identity. Brew does not let Piri hide the color of skin behind his Puerto Ricanness, and instead encourages him to take pride in a Negro racial identity. While in the South, Piri comes to understand that regardless of how he may have

understood his racial identity in the past, in the United States a dark skin color speaks for itself. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues, “it is *social* definitions, or how the ‘sign’ of dark skin is ‘read’ under the social system of Jim Crow segregation, that make Piri black; he is black because whites say he is” (212). Even in his travels beyond the South, in the Caribbean, South America, and Europe, Piri learns that “any language you talk, if you’re black, you’re black” (191).

A turning point in Piri’s journey comes when he meets the repugnant character Gerald West in a bar in Norfolk, Virginia; West, a mixed-race man from Pennsylvania, proclaims that his purpose for being in the South is to write a book on the “Negro situation.” West tells Piri and Brew that he is “really only one-eighth colored” (173), but under the “one-drop” rule of the United States this would qualify the tan-colored West as black. Although at first West appears to express a genuine sympathy and interest in the struggles of the African American community in the South, his true purpose seems to be to challenge his own classification as a black man: “‘It’s true I don’t look like a true Caucasian, but neither do I look like a true Negro. So I ask you, if a white man can be a Negro if he has some Negro blood in him, why can’t a Negro be a white man if he has white blood in him?’” (176) The answer to West’s question in the Spanish Caribbean would be, yes, depending on your appearance you could be a white man if you have both a white and black ancestry; within the system of racial classification in the United States, however, West can only “pass” as a white man. Initially Piri feels sympathy for West because like him he is caught between two races, but as Brew points out, Piri does not have the same choice to pass as West does, or as his light-skinned family members do,

for that matter. Caminero-Santangelo argues that “Gerald’s function is to hold a mirror up to Piri of his own dislikable racism, a fact which Piri dimly recognizes” (217). Although he may share West’s reticence to align himself with the black community, Piri’s appearance affords him no other choice, unless he would choose to continue down the road of self-hatred that his father has chosen.

The journey of racial self-awareness that Piri undertakes is not unique to his experience. Maritza Quiñones Rivera relays a similar racial awakening in her autobiographical account of her development of an Afro-Puerto Rican identity. She writes:

Being mistaken for an African American, from my perspective, suggests that my Blackness is not derived from my geographical and historical context, but, rather, it is constructed through the lens of the U.S. mainland’s Black/White racial dichotomy...the relative rigidity of U.S. racial binarism provides a space to reaffirm Blackness. Such a rigid racial process has allowed me to (re)define myself as an Afro-Puerto Rican in the United States. Here, I no longer have to suppress my negritude... (173)

Like Quiñones Rivera, Piri’s racial identity is shaped by how others see him, but although he must endure innumerable instances of demeaning behavior from white American culture, by accepting and celebrating his black identity he has been able to achieve a sense of peace within himself that his father was never able to. Thomas has revealed that despite the rage he felt at constantly being called “nigger,” “black bastard,” and “dirty spic,” he “found out that beyond your color or language there was something more important, called your sense of dignity” (qtd. in Binder 68). Thomas found his dignity through his writing, which he views as an important method to fighting racism. In an interview with Ilan Stavans, Thomas makes the claim that writing can

awaken consciousness and thus can inspire action...And this is the struggle that we have had to wage, to allow all the colors to express their humanity through literature...for we are not only geographic locations, colors, sexes, or preferences. We are earthlings who share a common bond—our humanity. (351-352)

Like Thomas, who uses his autobiographical experiences in *Down These Mean Streets* to come to terms with both his ethnic and racial identities, Puerto Rican novelist Edgardo Vega Yunque delves into the origins and manifestations of his own obsessions with race and color in his 2003 novel *No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent You Blew It Cauze Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again*.<sup>71</sup> Through the character of Vidamía Farrell, a light-skinned, half Puerto Rican and half Irish, upper-class girl, Vega Yunque explores the problematic nature of the cultural and racial identity of Puerto Ricans living in the United States; throughout the text he questions what it means to be Puerto Rican, and what it means to be American, in the face of conflicting constructions of race, both from without and from within.

Vidamía is born out of wedlock to Elsa López-Ferrer, née Santiago, an erstwhile “homegirl” from the barrio, and Billy Farrell, a white, blonde, blue-eyed Vietnam Vet from Yonkers, who served in the war with Elsa’s brother Joey. Elsa and Billy come together through Billy’s guilt at having let Joey be killed in the war and Elsa’s fascination with and “youthful fantasy” of Billy’s whiteness (22). Elsa quickly bans Billy from their house and their lives shortly after Vidamía’s birth, but Billy represents for Vidamía a “figure of considerable mythic qualities” (3), in part because she does not meet him until

---

<sup>71</sup> Vega Yunque published his first novel and short story collections under the name “Ed Vega.” *No Matter* is the first instance of his using his full name, a choice he continued to make for the remainder of his literary works before his death in August 2008.

she is 12 years old, but also because she wants to understand why, when other girls who have mothers who look like hers have names like Rivera, Rodríguez, Vázquez, and López, her name is Farrell. She also questions where her light skin and white features come from, but initially all she can learn about her father from her grandmother Ursula is that “His name was Billy Farrell and he had blond hair and blue eyes and used to live in Yonkers” (6).

While Vidamía is certainly interested in knowing more about her origins, it is ironically her mother who turns her search into an investigation into her ethnic identity. Elsa is continuously portrayed throughout the text as obsessed with whiteness and afraid of blackness, and from the first page of the novel she comes “to the understanding that it would be ethnically beneficial for Vidamía to spend part of the summer with her father” (3). This “understanding” is prompted by Vidamía’s fixation with the novel *Roots*, which she first learns about by overhearing a black couple discussing it in a restaurant. Vidamía is visibly moved by the novel, and later the mini-series, and she finds it hard to believe that the black people in the story, who are Americans, are treated so awfully. She also wonders if she would have been treated “the same way because she was Puerto Rican” (65). Vidamía reveals that she had been raised by her mother and wealthy Puerto Rican step-father Barry to be proud of her Puerto Rican-ness, but as Vega Yunque writes, “their pride was a mixture of knowledge acquired through education combined with a need to be distinct from other Latinos and perhaps even from blacks, embracing their culture as both a social and a political statement” (65). Ultimately, then, it is the empathy Vidamía feels for the plight of the black characters that frightens Elsa, because rather than

distancing herself from blacks, Vidamía is associating her own experiences with theirs; this is the catalyst for Elsa to encourage Vidamía to learn more about her white roots by spending the summer with her white Irish father.

Elsa's fear, of course, is not just for Vidamía's concern for the injustices perpetrated on African Americans, but more pointedly that Vidamía will learn about her own African roots, and learn that according to the United States' "one-drop" rule, she is not white. While Elsa identifies her mother Ursula as white, she reveals that her father, Justino "Tumba" Santiago, is a man with "dark skin and obvious African features" (87). She despises her father not only because he deserted their family to play music, but more importantly because of his black skin; it is through Tumba's skin that Elsa is touched by the *mancha de plátano*, or the "stain" of blackness that runs through all Puerto Rican families.

Quiñones Rivera makes the case that

Raising the concept of Blackness opens up a dialogue within the U.S. Latino community, which often displays its Afrophobia when confronted with the reality of its African heritage. Latin Americans and Latinos, who consider Afro-Latinas/os to be rare cases or foreigners not necessarily part of national ethnic discourses, often display internalized racism. (175)

This is certainly the case for Elsa, who is not only "bothered" by "the matter of blackness" (88), but retreats into her Puerto Rican identity to avoid the matter altogether.

Vega Yunque writes that Elsa

had always relegated the matter of her own connection to blackness to the cultural certainty that if one had a Puerto Rican background, naturally one had to include the European, the Amerindian, *and* the African into the cultural mix. But it wasn't a question of race. They were Puerto Ricans. (87)

By privileging her ethnic identity over her racial identity, Elsa conveniently avoids what she sees as the cultural stigma, and burden, of being black.

Because of her own hang-ups with race, Elsa “swore not to let the matter of blackness touch her daughter. She’d made sure of that. No pictures of her own father and no mention of him. Barry was white, and as far as she was concerned, Vidamía was white, and that was that” (89-90). While Elsa’s attitude and behavior are certainly deplorable and not to be praised, they are not entirely her fault, but rather stem from the larger Puerto Rican cultural imperative to move slowly away from blackness towards whiteness. Guerra argues that after the establishment of North American colonial rule, “Puerto Ricans of all classes were becoming less willing to identify with an African heritage or claim personal affiliation to concepts of blackness” (218), and that mixed-race individuals were encouraged to adhere to “white cultural norms” in order to bring them closer to whiteness and distance themselves from blackness. In many ways, this turn towards whiteness is entirely practical; neither the island’s white elite nor the mixed-race majority relished the thought of being racially categorized as “black” in a nation that relegated blacks to second-class citizens in the best of circumstances. Indeed, as Negrón-Muntaner argues, “A light-skinned Puerto Rican can escape the daily indignities of being a racialized minority and claim to be ‘Spanish,’ but a dark-skinned one cannot” (“When I Was a Puerto Rican Lesbian,” 514). Elsa is perfectly aware of this reality, but she is also aware of the racist consequences of denying her African heritage. Vega Yunque writes, “No one ever questioned [Elsa’s] whiteness, but like a specter, her father’s dark skin

mocked her, constantly stalked her, making her wish there was some way of genetically erasing that part of her background. God, she sounded like a Nazi” (90).

While Elsa cannot entirely erase her racial origins, she can, and does, participate in the Puerto Rican cultural imperative to “*mejorar la raza*.” Quiñones Rivera defines the practice in this way: “Black individuals are enjoined to improve the race by marrying and reproducing with lighter-skinned partners... The implicit message is that phenotypically, the dark-skinned body is defective, unattractive, undesirable, but sexually enticing and therefore, a social embarrassment” (164). By having a child with the white Billy Farrell, and later marrying the white Barry López-Ferrer, Elsa feels she is doing her part to improve Puerto Rican society. Imagine her disappointment, then, when she discovers that Vidamía is dating Wyndell Ross, an African American musician. Elsa calls Wyndell “ugly” (568) and a “Harlem or Bedford Stuyvesant deviant” (573), presumably because he is black, but Vidamía will not let her mother’s inherent racism stand. She tells her mother that Wyndell comes from a very well-off, educated family in Colorado, but sarcastically adds that they are “the only black family in the United States that doesn’t earn their money from drugs or crime” (574). She also calls her mother a hypocrite, because despite the fact that Wyndell and Vidamía are socioeconomic equals, Elsa does not approve of the match based on racial grounds, even though they all share the same African heritage.

It is through her relationship with Wyndell, in fact, that Vidamía seeks out more information about her black grandfather Tumba. Prompted by Wyndell’s insistence that because she is Puerto Rican, she is also African American, Vidamía confronts her

grandmother for more information about Tumba. Ursula reveals that Tumba does indeed have dark skin, but she describes him as *trigueño*, not black, again relying on the most common Puerto Rican intermediate category between white and black. Perhaps because she was born and raised in the United States, however, Vidamía does not necessarily recognize a distinction between her grandfather's color and that of the African Americans she has come to know. When Vidamía first meets Tumba, she is immediately struck by the overwhelmingly romantic feeling that "she [was] now part of a wonderful history that connected her to all the African people who had struggled in the United States" (521), recalling the same emotions that *Roots* had stirred in her. She also wonders, "Did his presence in her life make her an African-American?" (521), as Wyndell contended? For Vidamía, then, the fact that Tumba is categorized as *trigueño* by Puerto Rican standards does not mean he, and subsequently she, are not part of the larger African Diaspora.

Although Vidamía may initially feel connected to the African American community through coming to know her grandfather, her discovery of Tumba and his dark skin ends up raising more questions about her racial identity than it answers, and the conflict between the Puerto Rican and North American categories of race drives a wedge between her and Wyndell. While Wyndell insists on calling Tumba black, because Tumba speaks Spanish Vidamía does not necessarily categorize him as a *moreno*, as she does Wyndell, but rather, she thinks of him as something different. She tells her stepmother Lurleen,

I've been going up to see my grandfather, and, like I told you, he's dark, but he looks like my mother. He's not *black*. I mean, you can tell he's African. But not like Wyn, you know. He behaves totally relaxed. He's not

uptight all the time. It's cultural. It's like African people in the U.S. and African people everywhere else behave differently. (633)

Like her mother and grandmother, then, Vidamía begins to assume a difference between the African heritage of Puerto Ricans and that of African Americans. However, just as Elsa tries to force Vidamía to be white because she has light skin, green eyes, and a white father, Wyndell tries to force Vidamía to be black because she has at least “one drop” of black blood in her. Vidamía is understandably ambivalent about choosing either racial designation, partially because she considers that choosing one over the other would limit who she is and not fully reflect what she sees as a rich racial identity. Ultimately, Vidamía rejects both designations and instead falls back on her ethnic identity. She tells her stepfather, “It’s like being Puerto Rican is an antidote to this black and white stuff that is such a hang-up with Americans...In other words, being Rican means that you don’t have to decide whether you’re black or white” (773).

Vidamía’s search for her ethnic and racial identity, and the conclusion she comes to, that being Puerto Rican is somehow an antidote for being either black or white, mirrors Vega Yunque’s own process of becoming racially self-aware. In an interview with Wolfgang Binder, Vega Yunque reveals,

Race to me used to be an obsession, and at some point the love that I was given by my father’s side of the family [the darker side] kicked in in spite of the racism and in spite of the tremendous machinery of rejection that exists in the United States about blacks...The reason we can maintain our identity in New York as Puerto Ricans, in a way, is because we do not have to choose to be black or white, which is one of the demands the United States places on us. But when that kicked in, it just freed me so much from all the constraints of color so that I am at home with Afro-American culture, and I can really feel proud of the Afro-Caribbean tradition that I carry. (Vega 140-141)

While in many ways, Vega Yunque's perspective is admirable, it does not offer a full solution for the problematic constructions of race in both the United States and Puerto Rico. Perhaps, however, a solution does not exist and any search for one will ultimately be futile. As Duany argues, both the American "one-drop" rule and the Puerto Rican color-continuum model for racial classification are flawed, and "it is sterile to argue that one scheme is right and the other wrong, or that one is morally superior to the other. Instead, both systems are historically and culturally grounded in racist ideologies originating in colonialism and slavery" (*Puerto Rican Nation* 260). Perhaps the best we can do, then, is to not to forget these histories and continue to tackle the issue of race, in all its complexities.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude this section by returning to the myth that began it—that the Puerto Rican people are a rainbow people who equally value the indigenous, European, and African components of their heritage, and as such are incapable of racism. While my intention throughout this section has been to dispel this myth as a point of absolute fact and certainty, this is not to say that there are *no* instances in Puerto Rican culture and literature where this myth might retain some validity; after all, most myths derive from some accurate representation of reality. In a conversation with Carmen Dolores Hernández, in fact, Vega Yunque dispels the notion that his previous hang-ups with race meant that he wanted to deny his African heritage; he states, "It isn't that. I am

very proud of my African forefathers, but also of the Europeans and the Indians. I don't want anybody to tell me that I have to go by what they decide that I am" (206). It seems, then, that for Vega Yunque, and presumably others, the issue is not always whether or not they are denying their African heritage, but whether or not they will be forced to buy into the idea that they must choose one distinct racial identity over any other.

Vega Yunque's statement here raises the very real possibility that Puerto Rican culture is moving in the direction hoped for by José Luis González—towards making their pervading cultural myth of racial harmony a reality. This notion is somewhat supported by West-Durán in his article "Puerto Rico: The Pleasures and Traumas of Race," where he claims that "Despite pervasive and subtle forms of racial prejudice and discrimination, the country is ever more aware of its changing and evolving Afro-Caribbean identity and culture, which it also increasingly celebrates" (66). This awareness is evident in the increasing popularity of the works of Afro-Puerto Rican writers like Santos-Febres, and the growing critical attention paid to issues of race in Puerto Rican literature in general. West-Durán is sure to point out, however, that while contemporary Puerto Rican racial dynamics may certainly display "great nuance and fluidity," they often still retain a sense of "avoidance or denial," especially when it comes to the notion of African heritage, and that the "political and economic elites of the country are still mostly white or light-skinned mulattoes" (66). It seems, then, that while acknowledging and celebrating Puerto Rican African heritage is an important first step, more needs to be done to bridge the gap between the light-skinned elites and the majority of the population who fall on some other point of the racial color continuum.

One significant obstacle to the potential for an improved Puerto Rican racial future is the reality that Puerto Ricans in the United States have to choose between either a white or a black identity, and as Vega Yunque asserted in the quote above, no one relishes having to make that choice, let alone have it made for them. Any real change in Puerto Rican racial relations, then, must also include a change in North American attitudes towards and understandings of Puerto Rican heritage and racial construction. This is a complicated proposition, considering the difficulty Puerto Ricans face in being accepted into mainstream American culture, especially if they have dark skin; however, as Vidal-Ortiz points out, “racialization is a process that unifies Puerto Ricans’ racial experiences in the U.S., while skin color still operates as a distinct marker of access and treatment” (181), meaning that as long as privileges continue to be afforded to Puerto Ricans with lighter skin, whiteness will continue to be overvalued while blackness will be denigrated and denied.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Stephen Knadler’s article “‘Blanca from the Block’: Whiteness and the Transnational Latina Body” serves as an exceptional meditation on the value placed on whiteness in North American mainstream popular culture. The work includes an excellent critique of the public reception and perception of Puerto Rican Jennifer Lopez, along with an evaluation of her 2002 popular film *Maid in Manhattan*. Knadler claims that although “J.Lo” is emblematic of the “new Latina” in the twenty-first century United States, she “remains a...de-Africanized emblem,” despite the frequent attention paid to her posterior (an apparently “African” asset). Knadler argues that J.Lo’s popularity “needs to be situated in relation to her ability to assuage turn-of-the 21<sup>st</sup> century anxieties about the decline of ‘white’ America.” Because J.Lo can “pass” as white, then, her Puerto Ricanness, and more significantly, her “blackness,” is reduced to “a sign that is emptied of any living history, racial trauma, or African diaspora cultural expression that might challenge U.S. nationalism’s white self-conceptualization.” Knadler’s critique of a popular and benign public figure emphasizes my point that any calls for a reduction in Puerto Rican racism and colorism will not be successful without a similar call directed towards popular culture in the United States that overvalues and rewards whiteness.

### Conclusion: Race and Color at the Crossroads

I am what I am.  
*A child of the Americas.*  
A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean.  
*A child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads.*

...  
I am not African.  
Africa waters the roots of my tree, but I cannot return.

I am not Taíno.  
*I am a late leaf of that ancient tree,*  
and my roots reach into the soil of two Americas.  
*Taíno is in me, but there is no way back.*

I am not European, though I have dreamt of those cities.  
*Each plate is different,*  
wood, clay, papier mâché, metal, basketry, a leaf, a coconut shell.  
*Europe lives in me but I have no home there.*

The table has a cloth woven by one, dyed by another,  
*embroidered by another still.*  
I am a child of many mothers.  
*They have kept is all going*  
All the civilizations erected on their backs.  
*All the dinner parties given with their labor.*

—Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, “Ending Poem”<sup>73</sup>

I begin this conclusion with a rather extensive excerpt from “Ending Poem” by Puerto Rican mother and daughter poets Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales because I believe it reflects what is at the heart of my project: the fact that Spanish

---

<sup>73</sup> From the 1986 collection *Getting Home Alive*, pp. 212-213.

Caribbean culture and identity is the product of not one, but three mothers—the African, the Taíno, and the European—and that each mother has a role to play in keeping the civilization going. By privileging one mother over another, or by ignoring one mother entirely, we fail to see the whole cloth. That cloth is comprised of many colors, and while certain colors may be valued above others, removing one or another from the weave will result in an unraveling of the entire piece.

The phenomenon of colorism is certainly a kind of sociological unraveling and it has been my intention in this dissertation to both trace the various manifestations of colorism in select Dominican and Puerto Rican literary texts and to show how these manifestations are connected to the construction of race in these societies; histories of colonialism, slavery, and oppression; and contemporary lived experiences with race and racism in both island and mainland contexts, including conceptions of class and class difference and perceptions of beauty and attractiveness. I have been inspired by the calls of W.E.B Du Bois, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Toni Morrison to conscientiously study the impact and implications of race as it is understood in our contemporary world, and to extend the role of literary criticism to include honest examinations of the roles race and color play in literary texts, not merely as tropes of difference, but more significantly as reflections of the historical and social concerns of Dominican and Puerto Rican cultures.

I have consistently argued that although the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico may be considered part of a greater collection of Afro-Antillean cultures, each nation carries with it a problematic relationship to their African heritage, and this relationship corresponds to the distinct racial ideologies that have developed in each location:

*antihaitianismo* in the Dominican Republic and the myth of the “rainbow” people, or racial harmony, in Puerto Rico. These ideologies have a profound impact not only on the attitudes and beliefs of every-day Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, but on the literature produced from and about these cultures. My readings of the role African heritage plays in the texts I have examined is informed in large part by Morrison’s reading of the Africanist presence in American literature in *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison writes,

The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this. (17)

Morrison’s argument here is that the Africanist presence in American literature compels a sincere examination of the epistemologies of that literature itself, and the same may be said of the Africanist presence in Dominican and Puerto Rican literatures. Indeed, the Africanist presence in the primary texts I have examined reveals the fear, terror, and shame these cultures associate with blackness, along with the antithetical longing and desire for whiteness that is predicated by a history of slavery and colonial domination. It surely *would* be difficult not to recognize the connection between this presence and a thorough understanding of the literature itself.

I chose the literature of the Dominican and Puerto Rican communities as the subject of this study because of the obvious and prevalent manifestations of colorism within these texts. Each society is particularly concerned with the shades of skin between black and white, and their subsequent conceptions of race as a color-continuum rather than a binary construction lend themselves well to the kind of scrutiny I have endeavored

to enact. While I examined the history and literature of each nation independently in the previous sections, it is worth noting the connections between these two nations that are only separated by a short stretch of the Caribbean Sea. Each culture shares a similar history of colonization by Spain and both maintain a profound connection with their Hispanic heritages; the particular histories of slavery and the plantation system on each island allowed for greater racial mixing than in other Caribbean nations, which directly resulted in their present color-continuum models of racial construction; and, each society is currently connected to the United States both socially and economically, which allows for their conceptions of race as a color-continuum to be misunderstood and challenged upon im/migration to the mainland.

Although both Dominicans and Puerto Ricans must often reevaluate their conceptions of themselves as racial beings when they attempt to join mainstream American culture, Duany points out that even between the two nations themselves there exists a complex racial hierarchy that places Puerto Ricans above Dominicans on the color scale. He argues that although Puerto Ricans do not automatically assume all Dominican migrants to their island are black, still, “the dark skin color and other ‘African’ features of most Dominican immigrants, together with their low occupational status, place them at the bottom of the Puerto Rican stratification system” (“Reconstructing Racial Identity,” 282). Elsewhere he has noted the similarities between Puerto Rican attitudes towards Dominican immigrants and those of Dominicans towards Haitian immigrants: “The Puerto Rican stereotype of Dominicans as dumb, ignorant, dirty, disorderly, and violent recalls that of Haitians in the Dominican Republic” (*Puerto*

*Rican Nation* 27). Just as Dominicans reserve the racial descriptor “*negro*” for Haitians, Puerto Ricans conflate the terms “*negro*” and “*dominicano*,” and according to Duany, this “is a sign of increasing concern to those interested in promoting cultural diversity in Puerto Rico. It represents the growing ethnicization of racial stigmas on the Island, as well as the continuing perception that being black is foreign to national identity” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 27). It seems, then, that Benítez-Rojo’s concept of “an island that ‘repeats’ itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth” (3), is readily apparent in the relationship between these two nations.<sup>74</sup>

In her short story “Cloud Cover Caribbean,” Ana Lydia Vega establishes a connection between not only Dominican and Puerto Rican migrants, but Cuban and Haitian as well. She begins this metaphorical tale on the rough Caribbean Sea after a storm, where the Haitian Antenor first picks up the Dominican Diogenes and then the Cuban Carmelo. All three men are presumably on their way to what they hope will be a better life in Miami, but on this small boat, which is a microcosm for the Northern Caribbean, the old antipathies and prejudices arise. Antenor is at first reluctant to help the Dominican Diogenes, because of the historical hostilities between their peoples, but as Vega writes,

After some long exchanges of looks, mutually impermeable words and exhausting gestures, they reached the cheerful conclusion that Miami couldn’t be far away. And each told the other, without either

---

<sup>74</sup> To further elucidate this concept, Benítez-Rojo calls the Caribbean “a cultural meta-archipelago without center and without limits, a chaos within which there is an island that proliferates endlessly, each copy a different one, founding and refounding ethnological materials like a cloud will do with its vapor” (9). Certainly, one may consider the construction of race within the Caribbean at large, and the particular racial structures existing in the Spanish Caribbean to be considered chaotic, and my point here is to argue that the phenomenon of colorism is one facet of the Caribbean that seems to “proliferate endlessly.” While its manifestation in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic may seem somewhat different, in essence it can be seen as merely a copy or a repetition.

understanding, what he was leaving behind—which was very little—and what he was seeking. Then and there was spoken the royal pain of being black, Caribbean, and poor; deaths by the score were retold: clergy, military, and civilians were roundly cursed; an international brotherhood of hunger and solidarity of dreams was established. (2)

Vega is seeking to join the experiences of these men here to show the commonalities in the experiences of their peoples. That connection is further extended to a Puerto Rican when the men are picked up by a small American boat; once onboard the captain sends the men to the ship's hold where they are given the following instructions by a man speaking Puerto Rican Spanish: “‘If you want to feed your belly here, you're going to have to work and I mean work hard. A gringo don't give anything away. Not to his own mother.’ / And he handed them dry clothes on the end of his black arm” (6). Here the men are joined not only by their colors (as indicated by Vega's emphasis on the “black” arm of the Puerto Rican man), but by their shared fate in the custody of the gringo: all men will need to work hard in order to survive. Although it may be cliché to say it, in this sense the Dominican, Haitian, Puerto Rican (and Cuban) are literally all in the same boat.

I refer to Vega's story in this conclusion to emphasize not only the connections between these Caribbean nations, but also the connections of these nations to the United States, which has been a significant goal of mine throughout this dissertation. I believe the relationship between the nations of the Spanish Caribbean and the United States will only become more complicated and interesting in the years to come, and this certainly would include the literature being produced by and about Dominican and Puerto Rican im/migrants on the mainland. Constructions of race as well, in both Spanish Caribbean and North American contexts, will certainly undergo an overhaul in the coming years,

especially as the racial and ethnic demographics of these regions begin to change and shift. Preliminary data from the 2010 U.S. Census, in fact, indicates that over the past ten years the Hispanic<sup>75</sup> population in the United States grew by 43 percent (Humes, Jones and Ramirez 3); while over half of this population self-identifies as “white only,” over 40 percent of individuals identify themselves as multi-racial or “some other race,” a designator that is most often used to signify national origin<sup>76</sup> (Humes, Jones and Ramirez 6). Our society’s attitudes towards race and ethnicity, and our common definitions of race will most certainly be influenced by this growing population.

Ten years ago, just after the 2000 U.S. Census data was released, scholars Frank F. Montalvo and G. Edward Codina argued in their article “Skin Color and Latinos in the United States” that the growing rate of the Hispanic population in the United States would make it necessary for the white American community to reevaluate their perspectives on race and skin color. They advocated an increased number of “phenotype studies” which could be “the first step in preventing skin color from remaining a hidden and confounding variable” (337). These phenotype studies would presumably challenge traditional definitions of race and take into account the importance of skin color and other phenotypic markers in understanding cultural conceptions of race. Ten years later, this need remains and is perhaps even more pressing, as our definitions of race will need to expand to make better sense of not only what it means to be Hispanic or Latino/a, but

---

<sup>75</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanic or Latino as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (Humes, Jones and Ramirez 2). Provided examples of “other Spanish culture” include Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, and Spaniard.

<sup>76</sup> This report, in fact specifically refers to respondents listing their race as “Mexican,” “Puerto Rican,” “Salvadoran,” etc. (Humes, Jones and Ramirez 5).

what it means to be bi- or multi-racial. As our societies change, so too will our literature, leaving the line of inquiry I have developed in this dissertation open to use in many additional contexts.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> I could certainly see the need for an in-depth study of colorism in Cuban literature, one which would not be as concerned with the variety of shades of skin on the color-continuum as I have been in this project. I could also see interesting studies of colorism emerging in the contexts of Mexican and Chicano/a literature, Asian American literature, Native American literature, and, of course, African American literature.

## Works Cited

- Acuña, Rodolfo F. *U.S. Latino Issues*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2003. Print.
- Adán-Lifante, Virginia. "Rewriting History and Culture: 'El baúl de Miss Florence' by Ana Lydia Vega." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 10 (2004): 9-20. Print.
- Akbar Gilliam, David. "Mother Africa and la Abuela Puertorriqueña: Francisco Arriví, Rosario Ferré, and the Ambiguity of Race in the Puerto Rican Family Tradition." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 24.2 (2005): 57-70. Print.
- Alleyne, Mervyn C. *The Construction and Representation of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World*. Barbados: U of The West Indies P, 2002. Print.
- Almaguer, Tomás. "At the Crossroads of Race: Latino/a Studies and Race Making in the United States." *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*. Ed. Juan Poblete. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2003. 206-222. Print.
- Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume, 1991. Print.
- . *In the Name of Salomé*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2000. Print.
- . "A White Woman of Color." *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*. Ed. Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn. New York: Pantheon, 1998. 139-149. Print.
- "Annecy Báez." *Contemporary Authors*. Gale Literary Databases, 25 Feb. 2009. Web. 28 Oct. 2009.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.

- Ayuso, Mónica G. "Towards the Canonization of Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*." *Publication of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association* 8 (2004): 20-26. Print.
- Báez, Anney. *My Daughter's Eyes and Other Stories*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone P, 2007. Print.
- Barradas, Efraín. "North of the Caribbean: An Outline for a History of Spanish-Caribbean Literature in the United States." *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*. Vol. 1. Ed. A. James Arnold. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1994. 85-94. Print.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Trans. James E. Maraniss. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Durham: Duke U P, 1996. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Binder, Wolfgang. "An Interview with Piri Thomas." *Minority Voices* 4.1 (1980): 63-78. Print.
- Birmingham-Pokorny, Elba D. "'The Page on Which Life Writes Itself': A Conversation with Mayra Santos Febres." *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers*. Ed. Miriam DeCosta-Willis. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003. 451-461. Print.
- Blanco, Tomás. *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico*. 1948. New York: Arno P, 1975. Print.
- . "Elogio de la plena." *Revista Ateneo puertorriqueño* 1.1 (1935): 97-106. Rpt. in *Antología del pensamiento puertorriqueño, 1900-1970*. Vol. 2. Ed. Eugenio

- Fernández Méndez. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1975. 1002-1009. Print.
- Bost, Suzanne. *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000*. Athens: U Georgia P, 2003. Print.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. “‘Puerto Rican Negro’: Defining Race in Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*.” *MELUS* 29.2 (2004): 205-226. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Candelario, Ginetta E.B. “Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Myriam J.A. Chancy, and Nelly Rosario.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5.1 (2004): 69-91. *Project Muse*. Web. 24 Sept. 2009.
- Céspedes, Díogenes and Silvio Torres-Saillant. “Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz.” *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 892-907. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Sept. 2009.
- Chen, Edith Wen-Chu. “‘You are like us, you eat *plátanos*’: Chinese Dominicans, Race, Ethnicity, and Identity.” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27.1 (2008): 23-40. *ProQuest Central*. Web. 7 Oct. 2009.
- Cruz, Angie. *Let It Rain Coffee*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. Print.
- - - . *Soledad*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. Print.
- Cruz, Angie and Nelly Rosario. “Angie Cruz in Conversation with Nelly Rosario.” *Callaloo* 30.3 (2007): 743-753. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Sept. 2009.

- Cruz-Janzen, Marta. "Ethnic Identity and Racial Formations: Race and Racism American-Style and *a lo latino*." *Transnational Latina/o Communities: Politics, Processes, and Cultures*. Eds. Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez and Anna Sampaio. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. 147-166. Print.
- Cuervo Hewitt, Julia. *Voices Out of Africa in Twentieth-Century Spanish Caribbean Literature*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2009. Print.
- Darden, Joe T. "Blacks and Other Racial Minorities: The Significance of Color in Inequality." *Racism: Essential Readings*. Eds. Ellis Cashmore and James Jennings. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001. 237-246. Print.
- Davis, Darién J. "Introduction." *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Ed. Darién J. Davis. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. 1-16.
- DeCastro, Juan E. *Mestizo Nations: Culture, Race, and Conformity in Latin American Literature*. Tucson: U Arizona P, 2002. Print.
- Díaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996. Print.
- - - . *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam, 1989. Print.
- Duany, Jorge. *The Puerto Rican Nation On the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002. Print.
- - - . "Reconstructing Racial Identity: Ethnicity, Color, and Class Among Dominicans in the United States and Puerto Rico." *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and*

- Society*. Eds. Francisco H. Vázquez and Rodolfo D. Torres. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003. 274-289. Print.
- Dyer, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness." *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*. Ed. Paula S. Rothenberg. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Worth Publishers. 9-14. Print.
- Ebert, Kimberly L. "Demystifying Color-Blind Ideology: Denying Race, Ignoring Racial Inequalities." *Skin/Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era*. Eds. Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton. Chicago: U Illinois P, 2004. 174-196. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove P, 2008. Print.
- Ferré, Rosario. *Eccentric Neighborhoods*. New York: Plume, 1998. Print.
- . "The Gift." *Sweet Diamond Dust*. Trans. Rosario Ferré. New York: Plume, 1988. 87-118. Print.
- . *The House on the Lagoon*. New York: Plume, 1995. Print.
- . "How I Wrote 'When Women Love Men.'" *The Youngest Doll*. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1991. 147-151. Print.
- . Preface. *Sweet Diamond Dust*. By Ferré. Trans. Rosario Ferré. New York: Plume, 1988. vii-x. Print.
- . "Sweet Diamond Dust." *Sweet Diamond Dust*. Trans. Rosario Ferré. New York: Plume, 1988. 1-85. Print.

- . "When Women Love Men." *The Youngest Doll*. Trans. Rosario Ferré and Cindy Ventura. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1991. 133-145. Print.
- Fitz, Earl E. "From Blood to Culture: Miscegenation as Metaphor for the Americas." *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture: Inter-American Literary Dialogues*. Eds. Monika Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal. Austin: U Texas P, 2002. 243-272. Print.
- Gates, Jr. Henry Louis. "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1986. 1-20. Print.
- Géliga Vargas, Jocelyn A., Irmiris Rosas Nazario, and Tania Delgado Hernández. "Testimonios Afropuertorriqueños: Using Oral History to (Re)Write Race in Contemporary Puerto Rico." *Sargasso* 1 (2007-2008): 115-130. Print.
- Glissant, Edouard. "Caribbean Philosophy." *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Sara Castro-Klaren. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008. 531-549. Print.
- González, José Luis. *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country*. Trans. Gerald Guinness. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993. Print.
- Gordon, Maxine W. "Cultural Aspects of Puerto Rico's Race Problem." *American Sociological Review* 15.3 (1950): 382-392. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Gosser Esquilín, Mary Ann. "Nanas negras: The Silenced Women in Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla." *Centro Journal* 14.2 (2002): 49-63. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.

- Grosfoguel, Ramón. *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective*. Berkeley: U California P, 2003. Print.
- Guerra, Lillian. *Popular Expression and National Identity in Puerto Rico: The Struggle for Self, Community, and Nation*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998. Print.
- Haney López, Ian F. "The Social Construction of Race." *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. Ed. Richard Delgado. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995. 191-203. Print.
- Heredia, Juanita. *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.
- Hernández, Carmen Dolores. *Puerto Rican Voices in English: Interviews with Writers*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997. Print.
- Hernández, Elizabeth and Consuelo López Springfield. "Women and Writing in Puerto Rico: An Interview with Ana Lydia Vega." *Callaloo* 17.3 (1994): 816-825. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 June 2010.
- Herring, Cedric. "Skin Deep: Race and Complexion in the 'Color-Blind' Era." *Skin/Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the 'Color Blind' Era*. Eds. Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton. Chicago: U Illinois P, 2004. 1-21. Print.
- Hoetink, H. *The Dominican People: 1850-1900*. Trans. Stephen K. Ault. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982. Print.
- . -. "Race' and Color in the Caribbean." *Caribbean Contours*. Eds. Sidney W. Mintz and Sally Price. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. 55-84. Print.

- Howard, David. *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*. Oxford: Signal Books, 2001. Print.
- Humes, Karen R., Nicholas A. Jones and Roberto R. Ramirez. "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010." *United States Census 2010*. U.S. Census Bureau, March 2011. Web. 28 March 2011. PDF file.
- Itzigsohn, José, Silvia Giorguli, and Obed Vazquez. "Immigrant incorporation and racial identity: Racial self-identification among Dominican immigrants." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28.1 (2005): 50-78. *SocINDEX*. Web. 28 June 2009.
- Jablonski, Nina G. *Skin: A Natural History*. Berkeley, U of California P: 2006. Print.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print.
- Jimenez Roman, Miriam. "Un hombre (negro) del pueblo: José Celso Barbosa and the Puerto Rican 'Race' Toward Whiteness." *Journal of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños* 8 (1996): 8-20. Print.
- Jorge, Angela. "The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society." *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History, and Society*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Edna Acosta-Belen. New York: Praeger, 1986. 180-187. Print.
- Kanellos, Nicolás. "Thomas, Piri." *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature*. Ed. Nicolás Kanellos. Vol. 3. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2008. Print.
- Kevane, Bridget. "A Puerto Rican Existentialist in Brooklyn: An Interview with Esmeralda Santiago." *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary*

- Women Writers*. Eds. Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 2000. 125-139. Print.
- Knadler, Stephen. “‘Blanca from the Block’: Whiteness and the Transnational Latina Body.” *Genders* 41 (2005): n. pag. Web. 21 Oct. 2009.
- Knight, Franklin W. *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford U P, 1990. Print.
- Landale, Nancy S. and R.S. Oropesa. “White, Black, or Puerto Rican? Racial Self-Identification among Mainland and Island Puerto Ricans.” *Social Forces* 81.1 (2002): 231-254. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Levins Morales, Aurora and Rosario Morales. *Getting Home Alive*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986. Print.
- López, Alfred J. *Posts and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2001. Print.
- López, Irene. “Puerto Rican Phenotype: Understanding Its Historical Underpinnings and Psychological Associations.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 30.2 (2008): 161-180. *Sage Premier*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Luis, William. “Black Latinos Speak: The Politics of Race in Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*.” *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures* 12 (1998): 27-49. Print.
- Martínez, Elizabeth. “Beyond Black/White: The Racisms of Our Time.” *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. New York: New York UP, 1998. 466-477. Print.

- McGill, Lisa D. "A Conversation with Piri Thomas." *Bilingual Review* 25.2 (2000): 179-184. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 29 Aug. 2010.
- Middleton, Richard T., IV. "Institutions, inculcation, and black racial identity: pigmentocracy vs. the rule of hypodescent." *Social Identities* 14.5 (2008): 567-585. *SocINDEX*. Web. 28 June 2009.
- Montalvo, Frank F. and G. Edward Codina. "Skin Color and Latinos in the United States." *Ethnicities* 1.3 (2001): 321-341. *Sage Premier*. Web. 8 June 2010.
- Moreno, Marisel. "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities: A Reading of Junot Díaz's 'How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie.'" *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26.2 (2007): 103-117. *ProQuest Central*. Web. 7 Oct. 2009.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.
- Moya Pons, Frank. *The Dominican Republic: A National History*. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995. Print.
- Nakayama, Thomas K. and Robert L. Krizek. "Whiteness as a Strategic Rhetoric." *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. Eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. 87-106. Print.
- Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*. New York: New York U P, 2004. Print.
- . -. "When I Was a Puerto Rican Lesbian: Meditations on *Brincando el charco*: Portrait of a Puerto Rican." *GLQ* 5.4 (1999): 511-526. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 8 June 2010.

- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Ortiz Cofer, Judith. *The Line of the Sun*. Athens: U Georgia P, 1989. Print.
- - - . "The Paterson Public Library." *The Latin Deli*. New York: Norton, 1993. 130-134. Print.
- - - . "The Story of my Body." *The Latin Deli*. New York: Norton, 1993. 135-146. Print.
- Pérez, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of Home*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. "Introduction: Cheek to Cheek." *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* Ed. Gustavo Pérez Firmat. Durham: Duke U P, 1990. 1-5. Print.
- Pérez y González, María. *Puerto Ricans in the United States*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2000. Print.
- Quiñones Rivera, Maritza. "From Trigueñita to Afro-Puerto Rican: Intersections of the Racialized, Gendered, and Sexualized Body in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Mainland." *Meridians* 7.1 (2006) 162-182. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Rivera, Raquel Z. "Rapping Two Versions of the Same Requiem." *Puerto Rican Jam: Essays on Culture and Politics*. Eds. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997. 243-256. Print.
- Rodríguez-Luis, Julio. "Hispanic Literature: Introduction." *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*. Vol. 1. Ed. A. James Arnold. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1994. 3-6. Print.

- Rogoziński, Jan. *A Brief History of the Caribbean: From the Arawak and Carib to the Present*. Revised Ed. New York: Facts on File, 1999. Print.
- Rosario, Nelly. *Song of the Water Saints*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2002. Print.
- Roy-Féquièrre, Magali. *Women, Creole Identity, and Intellectual Life in Early Twentieth-Century Puerto Rico*. Philadelphia: Temple U P, 2004. Print.
- Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. Print.
- Sagás, Ernesto. *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2000. Print.
- Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- Santos-Febres, Mayra. *Our Lady of the Night*. Trans. Ernesto Mestre-Reed. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. Print.
- Scales-Trent, Judy. *Notes of a White Black Woman*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1995. Print.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
- “Sosa: Cosmetic cream caused lighter skin tone.” *MSN.FoxSports.com*. Fox Sports, 11 Nov. 2009. Web. 11 Nov. 2009.
- Stavans, Ilan and Piri Thomas. “Race and Mercy: A Conversation with Piri Thomas.” *The Massachusetts Review* 37.3 (1996): 344-354. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Aug. 2010.

- Stinchcomb, Dawn F. *The Development of Literary Blackness in the Dominican Republic*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2004. Print.
- Thomas, Piri. *Down These Mean Streets*. New York: Vintage, 1997 ed. Print.
- Torres, Arlene. "La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña 'Ej Prieta de Beldá' (The Great Puerto Rican Family is Really Really Black)." *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Vol. II. Eds. Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten, Jr. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1998. 285-306.
- Torres, Arlene and Norman E. Whitten, Jr. "General Introduction: To Forge the Future in the Fires of the Past: An Interpretive Essay on Racism, Domination, Resistance, and Liberation." *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Vol. II. Eds. Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten, Jr. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1998. 3-33.
- Torres-Saillant, Silvio and Ramona Hernández. *The Dominican Americans*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1998. Print.
- Torres-Saillant, Silvio. "One and Divisible: Meditations on Global Blackness." *Small Axe* 29 (2009): 4-25. *Project Muse*. Web. 7 Oct. 2009.
- - - . "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity." *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 1086-1111. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Sept. 2009.
- - - . "Writing Has to be Generous: An Interview with Angie Cruz." *Calabash* 2.2 (2003): 108-127. Print.
- Vega, Ana Lydia. "Cloud Cover Caribbean." Trans. Mark McCaffrey. *Rhythm & Revolt: Tales of the Antilles*. Ed. Marcela Breton. New York: Plume, 1995. 1-6. Print.

- . -. *Miss Florence's Trunk. True and False Romances*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Serpent's Tail, 1994. 163-261.
- Vega, Ed. Interview. *American Contradictions: Interviews with Nine American Writers*. Eds. Wolfgang Binder and Helmbrecht Breinig. Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 1995. 125-142. Print.
- Vega Yunque, Edgardo. *No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent You Blew It Cauze Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again*. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.
- Velázquez Vargas, Yarma. "Marco Said I Look Like Charcoal: A Puerto Rican's Exploration of Her Ethnic Identity." *Qualitative Inquiry* 14.6 (2008): 949-954. *Sage Premier*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Vicioso, Sherezada (Chiqui). "Dominicanyorkness: A Metropolitan Discovery of the Triangle." Trans. Maria Cristina Canales. *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity*. Eds. Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998. 62-67. Print.
- Vidal-Ortiz, Salvador. "On Being a White Person of Color: Using Autoethnography to Understand Puerto Ricans' Racialization." *Qualitative Sociology* 27.2 (2004): 179-203. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Wander, Philip C., Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K. Nakayama. "The Roots of Racial Classification." *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*. Ed. Paula S. Rothenberg. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Worth Publishers. 29-34. Print.

- Wells, Allen. *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa*. Durham: Duke U P, 2009. Print.
- West-Durán, Alan. "Puerto Rico." *African Caribbeans: A Reference Guide*. Ed. Alan West-Durán. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2003. 157-169. Print.
- - - . "Puerto Rico: The Pleasures and Traumas of Race." *Centro Journal* 17.1 (2005): 47-69. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Nov. 2009.
- Wigginton, Sheridan. "Character or caricature: representation of blackness in Dominican social science textbooks." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8.2 (2005): 191-211. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 28 Sept. 2009.
- Williams, Claudette M. *Charcoal and Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature*. Gainesville: U Florida P, 2000. Print.
- Zenón Cruz, Isabelo. *Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultural puertorriqueña*. 2 vols. Humacao, Puerto Rico: Editorial Furidi, 1974. Print.