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**GEOGRAPHIES OF TRAUMA IN LOIDA  
MARITZA PÉREZ'S GEOGRAPHIES OF  
HOME AND CRISTINA GARCIA'S  
DREAMING IN CUBAN**

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DREAMING IN CUBAN**

By

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## ABSTRACT

The scope of this thesis is to provide with a comparative analysis of Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*. Supported by trauma studies, feminist literary theories, diaspora and cultural studies, I claim that the women characters in both novels suffer different sorts of traumas. The diasporic movements these characters undergo are related to these traumas, either as causes or consequences. Gendering of trauma related to patriarchy, family history, socio-political contexts and sexual oppression are investigated as well as I argue that the characters suffer traumas derived related to these issues. Furthermore, I claim that the racism some characters experience is traumatic and add to other traumas they manifest. The comparative analysis between the two novels evidences that the traumas the characters go through cause fragmentation in their subjectivities and result in some sort of mental disorder. Trauma as a multilayered and complex phenomenon is a category that undercuts both novels.

## RESUMO

Nesta dissertação, eu desenvolvo uma análise comparativa das obras *Geographies of Home*, de Loida Maritza Pérez, e *Dreaming in Cuban*, de Cristina Garcia. Fundamentada por estudos de trauma, teorias literárias feministas, estudos culturais e da diáspora, argumento que as personagens femininas sofrem diferentes tipos de trauma. Os movimentos diaspóricos que elas realizam estão relacionados a estes traumas, como causa ou como consequência. Também investigo o gendramento de traumas sob o argumento de que estas personagens sofrem traumas relacionados ao sistema patriarcal, às histórias familiares, aos contextos sócio-políticos e à opressão sexual. Investigo ainda o racismo como causa de traumas para algumas personagens. Esta análise comparativa evidencia que os traumas que essas personagens apresentam causam fragmentação em suas subjetividades e resultam em alguns tipos de doenças mentais. Trauma é um tema que perpassa em vários níveis nas duas obras.

She can live the life of a prisoner,  
she can live the life of a princess,  
or she can be herself.

Chinese saying

*Casualties*, Trans Atlantic Entertainment, 1997.



## INTRODUCTION

The novels *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), by Cristina Garcia, and *Geographies of Home* (1999), by Loida Maritza Pérez, situate similar historical and geopolitical contexts while focusing on the mobility of subjects in the context of diasporic movements to the USA. Garcia was born in 1958 in Havana, Cuba, but her family left for the USA in 1961, after Fidel Castro won the revolution. Besides *Dreaming in Cuban*, she also published *The Aguero Sisters* (1997), *Monkey Hunting* (2005), and *A Handbook to Luck* (2008). Her latest novel *The Lady Matador's Hotel* was published in 2010. Garcia won the National Book Award for her work, and has been granted several fellowships in the USA (Voices from the Gaps). Loida Maritza Pérez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1963, and when she was three years old her family moved to the USA. The dictator Rafael Trujillo had been assassinated two years before her birth, but the thirty-one years of his rule were still felt in the country. *Geographies of Home* was originally written as a short story, but later published as a book, receiving many positive responses from the critics. Pérez has been acclaimed as one of the most important Latina writers in the US (Voices from the Gaps). *Geographies of Home* is her only novel to date.

Garcia and Pérez belong to the second generation of diasporic writers as they are children of immigrants. Elleke Boehmer, in a study on postcolonial literature, states: “The late twentieth century witnessed demographic shifts on an unprecedented scale, impelled by many different forces: anti-imperialist conflict, the claims of rival nationalism, economic hardship, famine, state repression, the search for new opportunities” (226). Along these lines, Sandra Almeida observes that:

the migratory movements and experiences in transit define the present transnational scenario and ... contemporary writers undertake the task

of recording the experience of mobility from different perspectives, be it an internal/inward movement, through domestic mobility, or an external/outbound one, through the displacement across border. (317-18).

As a result of these movements, the subjectivity and identity construction becomes “a process in flux, a temporary belonging rather than a unifying concept” (318). In the case of diasporic or migrant writings, mobility comes to be part not only of the fictional world, by also the writers’ “active roles as intellectuals” (Almeida 318). The experience of mobility as well as the process of subjectivity construction and fragmentation are the main focus in both Garcia’s and Pérez’s novels. In addition, in both novels trauma is a pervading theme which since the 1990s has been the concern of many fields of study, including literature. The four categories – trauma, diaspora, subjectivity construction and women’s roles – motivated me to develop in this thesis a comparative analysis of women characters in both novels. In my investigation I discuss how the women characters in both novels go through various sorts of traumatic experiences.

This work is relevant because it points out the significant similarities and contrasts in the novels, leading to a path not usually taken in relation to the different sorts of trauma the characters experience. In addition, by tracing a new route and proceeding to a detailed examination of the novels, I make a comparative analysis of the novels which, as far as I am concerned, has not been made so far.

*Geographies of Home* has caused great impact in the literary field, and some important research has been carried out on it, focusing on varied issues the novel highlights. Concerning these studies, the course on US Afro-Latino Literature offered by Antonio Tillis at UFMG in 2008 provided me with an extensive and inspiring analysis on the novel, and with the idea to develop a research on trauma. Other important work on the cited novel is the essay “I’m

Hispanic, not Black: Raza, locura y violencia em *Geographies Of Home* de Loida Maritza Pérez” (2005), by Dolores Alcaide Ramirez, which focuses on issues such as race and violence in the analysis of the characters Iliana and Marina. It is significant in that it introduces a discussion on the trauma of living between nations, the shaping of the diasporic subjectivity, racism and madness. In the same line of research, Cristiane Fontinha de Alcantara developed a comparative analysis of *Geographies of Home* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Alcantara’s thesis, entitled “A Legacy of Violence and Trauma in the Diasporic Literature from Hispaniola,” was completed in 2009 at UERJ and focuses on the historical and political context of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the rapes that take place in both narratives, and the physical and psychological consequence of traumatic memories caused by sexual abuse. Ramirez’s and Alcantara’s works are relevant because they approach the topics of trauma, rape, violence and racism. With a distinct focus, Leila Harris also wrote an article entitled “Outras Cartografias: Espaços Geográficos e Discursivos” (2007), in which she discusses the different meanings of home for the diasporic characters in *Geographies of Home*.

More recently, Juliana Borges Oliveira de Morais wrote the thesis “The Representations of Home in the Novel *Geographies of Home*” (2010), in which she investigates distinct notions of home for the characters and the idea that “home” is a fluid concept. All the mentioned works give evidence to the importance of the novel for literary studies and the richness of topics it can offer to scholars of various fields. During the conference “Trauma and Her stories,” held at Northampton University, in Northampton, England in November, 2010, I had the chance to meet author Sorcha Gunne, who informed me of the latest discussion on the cited novel. Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson edited a volume of essays entitled *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*, in which various scholars discuss narrative strategies that describe rape and sexual violence.

In regard to *Dreaming in Cuban*, there is a great number of books, essays and theses that demonstrate the success of Garcia's prolific literary production. Among these studies there is "Cuba as Text and Context" (1995), by Mary S. Vasquez; "From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina Garcia" (1997), by Katherine B. Payant; "Back to the Future" (2000), by Rocio G. Davis; "Memórias diaspóricas; sonhando e dançando em cubano" (2008), by Harris, and others that I quote in my investigation. Recently, there have been two theses on the novel; one, entitled "Children for Ransom: Reading Ibeji as a Catalyst for Reconstructing Motherhood in Caribbean Women's Writing," by Nadia I. Johnson, completed in 2005 at the Florida State University. The other, entitled "Being Cuban and American – Differently: Assimilation and Tradition in the Novels of Cristina Garcia, is authored by Marina Job Vasques de Freitas Espírito Santo, from Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, in 2007. Johnson investigates motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, the female body and the role of the ibeji (Yoruba's belief that twins are powerful spirit children) in creating a third space free from Cuba's socialism and the US's imperialism. Along this line of research, Espírito Santo's study deals with the experience of living in displacement, with hybridity, with cultural heritage and with the use of Santería as a connection between the diasporic characters and their home lands.

In regard to trauma, since the 1990s this topic has been increasingly approached in literary studies, a fact that I could testify at the conference I mention above. Most importantly, traumas studies are now focusing on gender issues, as well as on the trauma caused by the Holocaust, by collective violence, by terrorism and by wars. In regard to the latter, more recently, in Brazil, Sérgio Marino de Lima developed the thesis "The Translation of Traumatic Memories of the Vietnam War into Narrative Memory: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*," in 2010, at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Needless to say, all these works are relevant and irrefutably influenced me greatly in

the course of my investigation. Nevertheless, they differ from mine in that my thesis presents a comparative approach between the two novels, focusing on different types of traumas, which I consider a relevant reading of Garcia's and Pérez's works.

To accomplish such a task, throughout my thesis, I analyze the women characters and support my discussion with theoretical argumentation based upon authors whose focus is on the category of trauma, on diaspora, on gender, on ethnicity and on race. To ground my claim that the dislocation of the women characters to the US is related to some of the traumas they suffer, in the first chapter, "Narratives of Dislocation and Displacement," I initially proceed to a discussion on the concepts of subjectivity construction, relying on David E. Hall, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Susan Brison and especially on Susan S. Friedman's work on geographics of identity. Still in this chapter, I point out the importance of trauma studies in literature because they help understand many forms of individual and collective violence and of traumas related to migration, diaspora, segregation, slavery and genocide. Further on, I discuss the theories on trauma, relying on scholars such as Luckhurst, Caruth, Kaplan, Forter, Herman, Lurhman and Barret. In order to discuss the concept of diaspora, I rely on Avtar Brah, James Clifford, Sneja Gunew, Eva Hofman, Kamboureli and Mujcinovic.

In the second chapter, "Narratives of Trauma," to support my claim that the women characters' traumas are connected with their life stories and the roles they are expected to fulfill, I initially develop an investigation on the socio-political contexts of the Dominican Republic and of Cuba, supported by Derby, and I relate it to the events in the characters' lives. Concerning Cuba, I rely on St. George's and Moore's discussion about Castro and the myths constructed about him. To discuss the women's traumas caused by family problems and gender oppression, I am supported by Layton, Brown, Chodorow, Chauí, Gilbert and Gubar, Butler and Nick. My discussion of the same issues in *Dreaming in Cuban* is based on the works of Kevane, Johnson, Payant, Davis, Vasquez and Shemar.

Finally, in chapter 3, “Race Matters” I discuss the terms race and ethnicity and the implications of racism in both novels, as well as their connection to the traumatic events the women characters undergo. My discussion on the concepts of ethnicity and race is supported by Appiah’s, Sollors’s, Murji’s, and Stuart Hall’s theories. Next, I discuss the formation of both the Dominican Republic and Cuba discourses on racial issues. To proceed to that discussion I am supported by Berry and Henderson, Saillant, Stinchcomb, Candelario, and Morejón. Further on, I discuss how racism is represented in both novels, relate it to some of the women characters’ traumas, and then delineate the consequences it brings for these women’s lives. The scholars who support my investigation in this section are James F. Davis, Waters, Padura, Cunningham, and Feagin and Mckinney. In the last section of the chapter I discuss the use of Santería related to some characters’ search for their subjectivities and also its relation to racism.

The reason for my choosing trauma for this investigation on both novels is that in modern times traumas are an inherent part of our societies. Trauma studies are significant for they bring light to the construction and fragmentation of men’s and women’s subjectivities, and, in some cases, help explain the configurations of gender roles. Pérez’s and Garcia’s novels especially foreground the discussion of traumatic experiences for women characters under different aspects. The analysis of patriarchy, the movements of dislocation, the rapes they suffer, the socio and political contexts and the mental disorders in both novels all lead to an understanding of the traumas these women suffer.

Although women characters from different cultures have much in common in terms of the political, social and religious experiences, they go through distinct forms of trauma, derived from situations such as abandonment, sexual repression, rape and diaspora. For some characters these traumas result in mental disorders of several orders. Trauma and the many consequences it brings to women characters are discussed in both novels, unveiling problems

that are not frequently tackled in trauma studies. It is because of that I consider my approach a new possibility of reading the novels. Therefore, I hope my investigation will be relevant for future studies concerning trauma, dislocations, subjectivity construction and fragmentation.

## CHAPTER 1

### NARRATIVES OF DISLOCATION AND DISPLACEMENT

#### 1.1 Trauma: History Reviewed

The novels *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Geographies of Home* both focus on characters that go through similar experiences in their Caribbean homelands and in their diasporic movements to the USA. In both novels trauma is discussed under different perspectives and the diasporic movements become significant as they are connected to the traumas some women characters undergo throughout the narratives. Because of that, the objective of this chapter is to discuss these diasporic movements and analyze their influence on the characters' traumas.

In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst claims that trauma entered the modern history scenario as a consequence of several vicissitudes humankind has gone through, such as wars, slavery, colonization, diasporas, and terrorism (2). He explains that the term “trauma” was “first used in English in the seventeenth century in medicine, (and) it referred to a bodily injury caused by an external agent” (2). In the twentieth century the concept is extended to psychological/mental disorders as well, mainly because of Freud’s studies on the field. New theories on trauma emerged because of the World War II and the Holocaust, immediately followed by the Vietnam, Korea, and Gulf Wars. In the 1980s trauma was acknowledged by the American Psychiatric Association as the cause of harmful symptoms in individuals, being thus classified as a disease (Luckhurst 1). Luckhurst argues that “the arrival of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) helped consolidate a trauma paradigm that has come to pervade the understanding of subjectivity and experience in the advanced industrial world” (1). This discovery ignited a wave of studies in several fields of knowledge



which usually deal with people who undergo traumatic experiences. These studies show that modern societies have been defined by many levels of trauma.

In what concerns literature, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, in their work on postcolonial trauma novels, highlight the importance of trauma theory “for understanding colonial traumas such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide” (3). The women characters I analyze are subject to different sorts of trauma that cause fragmentation in their subjectivities. This happens to eight women characters in both novels: Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina, and Iliana in *Geographies of Home* and Celia, Felicia, Lourdes, and Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*. For some of these women traumas result in some type of mental disorders.

### **1.1.1 The Shaping of the Subject**

In order to discuss trauma it is relevant to discuss the construction of subjectivity in individuals since, as E. Ann Kaplan points out, “trauma produces new subjects” (1). In his turn, Donald E. Hall defines subjectivity as “the intersection of two lines of philosophical inquiry: epistemology (the study of how we know what we know) and ontology (the study of the nature of being or existence)” (4). He adds that the terms “identity” and “subjectivity” have been used interchangeably; however, subjectivity for him involves not only one’s interrogations about the self, but also the limitations and constraints in one’s perception and comprehension of identity (3). As for the latter, Hall defines it as a “particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long- term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being” (3). In addition, Hall claims that “[s]ubjectivity may never be under any firm or even measurable degree of control, however, what we do with our understanding of subjectivity is clearly susceptible to some degree of control” (113). Despite

the difference underlying the terms “identity” and “subjectivity,” many scholars use “identity” when referring to the process of subjectivity construction. I decided to use the term “subjectivity” in my analysis because the women characters in both novels constantly interrogate their selves, trying to define themselves in relation to patriarchy, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. However, in discussing the implications of ethnicity and race in the third chapter, I follow the scholars who use the term “ethnic identity” or “racial identity,” which, I believe, fit the characters’ definition of themselves when facing the labeling of ‘Other’ in the US’s social context. The process of subjectivity construction and the interrogations that it incites become more complicated on account of these characters’ diasporic movements to the US.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson follow this line of thought as they claim that subjects get to know themselves through experience, which becomes possible through multiple discourses that are the cultural basis of experience and also through materiality: “feelings of the body, feelings of spirituality, powerful sensory memories of events and images” (26). Similarly, Susan Brison argues that the construction of the self is an unending process because human beings are continuously reshaping themselves, keeping pace with social contexts that give meaning to the self’s description (41). That is, the human being, as such, is never ready. The concepts discussed above, in different perspectives, converge to a common understanding that the social context one is inserted in is vital for the construction of one’s subjectivity, and consequently, one’s identity. As the novels in this study focus on characters from the Caribbean, these concepts are significant in the sense that the Dominican Republic and Cuba share similar historical contexts such as the colonization by Spain, the history of slavery, the invasions by the USA and, more recently, the wave of diasporic movements to that North American country. Nevertheless, within these similarities lie differences that account for configurations of both nations that underpin the portrayal of the women characters

in both novels, for instance, the way miscegenation between Africans and Spanish colonizers occurred during and after slavery, the social-political contexts, and the causes of the diasporas.

In her work on feminism and multiculturalism, Susan S. Friedman's insights refer back to the previous theories on subjectivity as she offers a more encompassing theorization that she names "the new geography of identity" and in which she disagrees with the idea that gender is the only determinant of one's identity. For Friedman, the six "related but distinct discourses" (20) figure identity as "a positionality, ... a crossroads of multiply situated knowledge" (19), in which "discourses of feminism, multiculturalism, post structuralism, and postcolonial studies" (20) converge. According to her, the "discourses of multiple oppression; multiple subject positions; contradictory subject positions; relationality; situationality, and hybridity" (20) came out as consequences of the political changes and social movements, and although they might be seen as progressing through time, they do not correspond to phases in the feminist movement (20). Friedman also points out that "race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and national origin" (21) construct a multiple self that might be oppressed or not. Equally important are the contradictions this self undergoes, as for instance, one might be sexually oppressed and class privileged at the same time. Furthermore, one axis of the self – as in the case of gender – should not be regarded in isolation but in relation to other axes. Moreover, space plays an important role in the constitution of the self because it is often fluid and resistant to fixity. Lastly, the conditions brought forth by immigration and life on the borders may result in a hybrid self, marked by what Anzaldua calls "living in the borderlands" (216). This self exists between splitting, doubling, and grafting (21-24). Accordingly, the postmodern self in Friedman's theory outdistances the concept of a whole self, and moves towards a "discourse of spatialized identities constantly on the move" (19).

The subjectivities of the diasporic women characters analyzed in this investigation are framed by the different discursive practices deriving from their home countries, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and their host land, the USA. The shock between these different experiences in both contexts gives rise to distinct levels of traumas that take place differently in both novels and that result in fragmentation for these women's subjectivities as mentioned previously. On the one hand, for Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina, and Iliana, in *Geographies of Home*, and Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban* traumas are a consequence of diasporic dislocations, and, on the other, for Lourdes in *Dreaming in Cuban*, trauma is the cause of her diasporic movement.

### **1. 1. 2 The Fragmentation of the Subject**

For the analysis of these characters I rely on Friedman's and Lynne Layton's concepts of subjectivity fragmentation. Friedman's is interdisciplinary, outdistances the gender-based definition of identity and celebrates a diversity of the self. Additionally, it is a more encompassing theory that overlaps that of Layton's, which is a psychoanalytical one. In this theory, Layton sees the discourse of cultural criticism and postmodern critical texts, whose principles follow the Lacanian theory, as problematic because fragmentation may be a painful process, and should "not [be] posited as a feature of normal development" (107). She contends that far from being a condition of selfhood, fragmentation arises from relations between subjects. This way, Layton's theory resounds in Friedman's "geographics of relationality" as both scholars defend the importance of interpersonal relations in either shaping one's subjectivity and identity or fragmenting it. Additionally, Layton argues that it is crucial to discuss the fragmentation caused by oppression (sexual abuse, for instance), as it may bring forth pain and a feeling of powerlessness that end up in mental disorders. Besides,

literature on trauma has described traumatized individuals marked by splitting and fragmentation. For Layton, the glossing over of pain is meaningful and arguable (115-16). As a result, both theories will be useful for the study I propose as Aurelia, Marina, Iliana, Rebeca, Lourdes, and Pilar, characters I analyze in this chapter, undergo processes of fragmentation in their subjectivities. For them fragmentation takes place through pain and powerlessness, but also results in a positive acknowledgment of the selves for two of them. The complexity of these characters, therefore, requires a consistent and broader theoretical basis of analysis.

Fragmentation also manifests itself in the aesthetics of the narrative as both novels make use of multiple points of view, thus transpiring, according to Craps and Buelens, a sense of discomfort. It also leads to identifications and voices traumatic experiences (7-8). Elleke Boehmer states that “the multivoiced novel ... is regarded as essential plurality- noisy, authentic, street-muddied” (229). In her analysis of *Dreaming in Cuban*, Leila Harris states that “[t]he non-linear, polyphonic narrative emphasizes the geographical, political, and emotional fragmentation of a family” (56, my translation). The fragmented narratives in both novels convey a feeling of identification because it is possible to hear each character’s thoughts and voices; however, they also unveil separateness, displacement, and splitting. Fissures, displacement, and distortions are translated by the many voices permeating the narratives of both novels. The central protagonists, usually present in conventional narratives, give place to the various equally important characters that provide the reader with different versions of events related to each one of them.

*Dreaming in Cuban* is told through the voices of three generations of women: Celia, her daughters Lourdes and Felicia, her granddaughters Pilar and Milagro, women closely connected to Cuba, their homeland, a country divided by its politics and geography. The

viewpoints shift from the first to the third person and the text also includes Celia's letters to her Spanish lover, Gustavo.

*Geographies of Home* is story of Papito and Aurelia and their fourteen children, who flee from the Dominican Republic to escape from Rafael Trujillo's reign of terror and from their country's extreme poverty. An omniscient third person narrator tells the story in free indirect discourse. Through the voices and memories of Papito, Aurelia and their daughters Iliana, Marina and Rebecca, the narrator tells the facts through these characters' eyes. The traumatic events the women undergo in both novels emerge through these fragmented narratives.

### **1.1.3 The Paths of Trauma**

Two kinds of trauma take place in the novels and that makes their analysis more complex. To investigate them, I need to discuss briefly the history of trauma as a disease. The official definition of PTSD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of 1987 (DSM-III-R), states that:

The essential feature of this disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience (i. e., outside the range of such common experience as simple bereavement, chronic illness, business losses, and marital conflict). The stressor producing this syndrome would be markedly stressing to almost anyone, and is usually experienced with intense fear, terror and helplessness. (The Circumcision Reference Library).

On the other hand, in the 1990s, Cathy Caruth, whose theory on trauma is considered groundbreaking, argued that “[t]raumatic disorders reflect the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking-over – physically and neurologically – of the mind by an event that it cannot control. As such it is understood as the most real, and also most destructive psychic experience” (24). Being so, Caruth’s definition and the one provided by the DSM converge to explain specific harmful events that are not part of what is considered usual human experiences. While Marina, Iliana and Lourdes present traumas that fit the definition shown above, they also manifest symptoms that fit the characteristics of another sort of trauma. In the same way, Aurelia, Rebecca, Felicia and Pilar go through events that do not fall into the category of trauma discussed above; however, they present symptoms which seem to be related to this other kind of trauma.

Kaplan’s study goes in the direction of this second type of trauma, as she tackles an issue which trauma studies have not often discussed, the “family” trauma, the “trauma of loss, abandonment, rejection, betrayal” (19). For her, these traumatic events are usually neglected because traumas perpetrated or suffered by men, rather than women, children or whole families, have been the main focus. Thus, traumas suffered by women are not approached very often because of this gendering of traumas (19). Following this line of thought, Laura S. Brown points out that what the DSM defines as “the range of human experience” is “what is normal and usual in the lives of men of a dominant class: white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” (101). For the author, private events like child abuse, rape and beating of women occur in veiled circumstances, within the sacred walls of home, and are considered usual occurrences. Because of that, they do not fit the category of trauma defined previously. Brown postulates that “secret, insidious” traumas are the expression of the institutions of a dominant culture (101-02).

Similarly, Deirdre Barret states that “common traumas,” which take place in the course of normal life, like bereavement, divorce or a life-threatening illness, do not appear as harmful as rape, child abuse, or wars. And yet, they lead to grief, shock, and a feeling of insecurity that enable them to be defined as traumas (5). On his turn, T. M. Luhrmann, in examining the traumatized self, refers to events he denominates “more mundane quiet traumas,” (158) that despite working in a different way also leave deep marks on the self. Luhrmann adds that, “[s]ome injuring events are dramatic and soul-destroying. Some are quiet and humiliating” (158). So far, all the concepts of trauma discussed point to a sort of traumatic experience that differs from the violent traumatic event Caruth’s theory established.

In a very recent study on trauma and literary form, Greg Forster points out the relevance of Caruth’s and other trauma critics’ works in prompting developments in psychoanalytic concepts that are decisive for collective processes in which “punctual traumas” have had a major expression, such as the great wars and the Holocaust (259). Most importantly, in some occasions, such concepts have had their applicability extended to other traumatic events, such as rape and child abuse, says Forster (259-60). Yet, like Kaplan, he calls attention to the limitations of these concepts in explaining forms of trauma that have become naturalized in social contexts, such as rape, racism, the subjugation of women and those categorized as “others.” As these traumas are chronic, it is “necessary to excavate and ‘estrangle’ them in order to see them *as* social traumas” (260, author’s emphasis). This last concept is fundamental for the argumentation and discussion in this thesis because all the characters suffer some kind of social trauma. As to the women characters analyzed in this chapter, the social traumas converge basically to the diasporic movements they undergo, although they are all aggravated by other circumstances which I will discuss later.

Sneja Gunew claims that “[d]iaspora is a term often used in a normative sense to mean dispersal and dislocation” (29). Along the same lines, James Clifford advocates that



“[d]iasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population” (304). Highlighting the connection between Jewish history with the term “diaspora,” Clifford argues that the Jewish, Greek and Armenian diasporas are considered the origins of a discourse that is being appropriated by others, being specifically related to decolonization, immigration, and global communication. Clifford also differentiates the concept of diasporas from that of immigration, as the latter convey a sense of temporality (311). According to Avtar Brah diaspora “derives from the Greek – *dia*, ‘through’, and *speiren*, ‘to scatter’. Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys” (181). In this sense, in *Geographies of Home* the whole family dislocates from the Dominican Republic to the USA while in *Dreaming in Cuban* Lourdes immigrates with her husband Rufino and her daughter Pilar, leaving her mother and sister in Cuba.

Gunew defines diasporic subjects as “often used to represent deviations from the supposedly ‘pure’ and ‘rooted’ characteristics of national citizens; they indicate instead the instabilities of hybridity, *métissage*, creolization, and ‘contamination,’ elements that have also defined the condition of (post) modernity more generally” (30). This definition is consequential for my analysis because the diasporic women characters in both novels exhibit, in different ways, some of the “instabilities” defined by Gunew. Equally important is the gendered character of diaspora, which as Clifford points out, has not been focused on very often, “thus normalizing male experiences” (313). As the diasporic experience has been associated with traveling, displacement, and disarticulation, men’s experiences have predominated. And yet, Clifford puts in evidence the role women perform in diaspora and the changes that it brings about to the dynamics of gender relations. He claims that women face new roles that might open new political spaces, leading to independence and new forms of

empowerment which derive from a better economic situation. For Clifford, life for women in diaspora may attain a double, sometimes painful face, “struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies,” and concomitantly, by embodying the role of culture bearers, preserving a ‘home’ culture and tradition (314). Clifford’s theorization delves into decisive aspects for my discussion in this chapter because the women characters face the predicaments described and some are ascribed, in different levels, the role of culture bearers.

Fatima Mujcinovic points out that in Central America and the Caribbean, “from 1950-1983, almost two million people were forced to relocate, (and) the effects of such massive relocations are typically experienced as psychological rupture that inevitably problematizes the articulation of individual and collective subjectivity” (1). Corroborating such assumptions, in both novels the characters suffer the effects of dislocations in different ways, either through depression, feelings of non-belonging, difficulty or refusal to learn the new language, and reactions other than the ones discussed till now and that deserve further discussion. In contrast, Smaro Kamboureli argues that, “the new reality is not necessarily the only cause of the trauma that accompanies displacement; ... trauma may also derive from the forces that construct subjectivity, that give rise to the desire, or the need to become diasporic subjects” (14). Thus, the cause of the trauma is not limited to the movement of dislocation, as I shall examine later.

## **1.2 Traumas in *Geographies of Home***

### **1.2.1 Aurelia: Longing and Rebirth**

For Aurelia, the matriarch of the Dominican family in *Geographies of Home*, the psychological rupture is effectuated by panic and subsequent depression as she faces the cold

weather and solitude because of the distant behavior of people around her in New York city. Carola Suárez-Orozco states that “[i]mmigrants are stripped of many of their sustaining social relationships, as well as of their roles which provide them with culturally scripted notions of how they fit into the world” (195). The changes in the social context as well as the difficult adaptation in the new environment take Aurelia to the hospital for nine months with no hope of recovery. Only upon realizing that her children would be motherless in an alien land does she regain strength. However, that would not be without costs as “[g]one were her confidence and self-respect. How could she trust herself when she had willingly brought herself to the brink of death? ... how could she have expected her children to grow strong and independent after they had witnessed her emotional collapse and increasing deference to Papito ...?” (Pérez 24).

In addition, instead of being a reference of strength for her children, Aurelia also depends on them to communicate because she cannot speak English. Talking about this issue, Suárez-Orozco points out that such dependence may bring tension within the family and also increase in the parent the sense of incompetence in dealing with a new situation (198). Similarly, Eva Hoffman, in “The New Nomads,” explains that “our inner existence, our sense of self, depends on having a living speech within us. To lose an internal language is to subside into an inarticulate darkness in which we become alien to ourselves; to lose the ability to describe the world is to render that world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid” (48). For Aurelia, this native language is Spanish, and the inability to speak the language of her adopted country – chances are that it might also have been a refusal to learn English – evolve into a sense of failure, of powerlessness and of dependence on her husband’s decisions.

Aurelia is aware that there is a void in her life that is determinant to her family problems, and she is sure that this absent element would help her in guiding herself and her family, “[a]s she delved into the past she was conscious of something missing in the present –

something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children” (Pérez 23). This absence is centrally connected to the legacy of spiritual leadership she received from her mother in her youth, but which she chooses to abandon, clinging to Papito’s Adventist religion. Already disconnected from her spiritual inheritance, Aurelia undergoes, again, separation from her cultural background in her dislocation to the US.

To support my argument, I quote Hoffman when she argues that, “a culture does not exist independently of us but within us. It is inscribed in the psyche, and it gives form and focus to our mental and emotional lives. We could hardly acquire a human identity outside it” (50). The dislocation to the USA, the distance from the cultural background she was familiar with in the Dominican Republic and the disconnection from her spiritual inheritance leads to Aurelia’s fragmentation in her process of self-definition. These predicaments are fundamental in adding to the family problems, as she was not able to support her children at the time of their dislocation to the USA. The huge pile of dust Aurelia sweeps and collects everyday in her house is a metaphor for all the fragments that her identity has been dissolved into, the ones she might have tried to put them together to construct her subjectivity and thus sustain herself and her family.

Nevertheless, after Marina’s third suicide attempt Aurelia suddenly changes and finds out that her legacy is the key to help her solve the problems which began when she arrived at the USA. Identifying herself as a mother and as a sorcerer, who is conscious of her ability to talk to spirits and command them, she employs her strength and agency to face Marina’s and Rebecca’s chaotic conditions. Accordingly, Aurelia goes from an initial phase of painful psychological fragmentation to that of acknowledging the intersection of multiple subjects within herself, as defended by Friedman. The merging of these multiple subjectivities is the

initial step which gives Aurelia a sense of self and control over her own life and her family's well being. It also accounts for Aurelia's complexity as a character.

### 1.2.2 Rebecca: The American Dream

Rebecca is Aurelia's eldest daughter and the first one to travel to the USA. She immigrates when she is twenty-one, but when the reader is introduced to her she is forty. Rebecca, as many other immigrants, believed that she would find gold on the streets of New York (Pérez 59); however, frustration follows her arrival to the USA as she faces the new reality. Explaining this argument, Suárez-Orozco points out that: "The poorest immigrants, who are largely members of the lower classes in their country of origin, often suffer tremendous adversity as a result of immigration" (201). The hardships she has to face in her adopted land, the fact that she was not eligible for a green card while her relatives were able to get one, and her inability to speak and write in English inhibit the fewer chances she has to get a better job and fulfill her desire for the American dream. All these circumstances undermine Rebecca's sense of self. She is not able to escape poverty in exile; she has to respond to the demands of motherhood and marriage, and is entrapped by the internalized rules of a patriarchal society she was taught to accept. She is the eldest among her siblings; however, she does not exhibit the qualities that would entitle her to become a culture bearer and inspire the respect and deference she craves for. In relation to this situation of women in diaspora, Gayatri C. Spivak points out in "Diasporas Old and New" that:

The disenfranchised woman of the diaspora – new and old – cannot, then, engage in the *critical* agency of civil society – citizenship in the most robust sense – to fight the depredations of "global economic

citizenship”. . . . For her the struggle is for access to the subjectship of the civil society of her new state: basic civil rights (252).

Endorsing Spivaky’s comment about the difficulty in having access to subjectship in “the civil society of her new state,” the novel presents through Rebecca the dilemmas of a character who does not have the documentation that would allow her to pursue better opportunities in the USA, nor skills or means to achieve a decent living style; therefore, she has no access to those rights. Entrapped in a limbo, without a civil existence, the only chance of survival and also of achieving empowerment she sees is through marriage. This form of escape, in addition to a disposition for an endless hope as “[s]he had been raised on miracles, taught from early childhood to believe” (Pérez 56), leads to Rebecca’s multiple dysfunctions.

On her turn, Suárez-Orozco demonstrates that: “Disappointed aspirations and dreams, when coupled with a hostile reception in the new environment, may lead to feelings of distrust, suspicion, anger, and even well-founded paranoia” (197). In line with this argument, the narrative presents Rebeca’s paranoia as a manifestation of the belief that her family cannot see Pasión’s good qualities because they do not want her to be happy. She also oscillates between acknowledging her chaotic life and blaming herself for not satisfying Pasión’s sexual needs. Furthermore, she seems to develop a sort of masochist pleasure in her husband’s physical abuse of her.

For Rebecca, to leave her country on her own and venture into an alien country is a difficult accomplishment, considering her background as a girl growing up in the countryside in a very poor region of the Dominican Republic. However, as Suárez-Orozco ponders, the reception the immigrant gets upon her arrival is a key factor to her adaptation. She also claims that, “[p]rejudice and exclusion are established forms of social traumata. The exclusion can take a structural form (when individuals are excluded from the opportunity structure) as well as an attitudinal form (in the form of disparagement and public hostility)” (204).

Concerning immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America, Suárez-Orozco states that those “who ‘look’ different from the Anglo-European majority make many non-immigrants uncomfortable” (210). She adds that, “[a]t best they are viewed as competitors and at worst they are seen as sinister. As a result, a range of negative attributes can be easily projected onto them” (210). The perception of these projected negative attributes may have been harder for some characters to cope with, especially Rebecca as she is a light-skinned Black.

In line with what Donald Hall alludes to in his discussion on subjectivity, it may be argued that Rebecca acquiesces in her acceptance of traditional patriarchal values in that she relinquishes the agency that took her to the USA to her abusive and violent husbands, thus being unable to develop her subjectivity. She thus falls in line with the role of women: she becomes a stereotypical mother and wife under patriarchy. The control she could have had over her own self lies in the recognition of her many subjectivities as a poor Latina - black, daughter, mother, wife, and immigrant. As she fails to attain a sense of self, she denies the reality of her chaotic life. The symptoms of this fragmentation can be detected by the sloppy way she treats her own body, by not bathing, or combing her hair. Her body might be seen as a reflection of her state of mind: chaotic, rotting and on the verge of ruins. Diaspora thus becomes a complicating factor because of the many obstacles she encounters in her adaptation in the US. The way Rebecca sees herself inside a social group evidences that she is caught between two cultures, two ways of being, a duality she is unable to reconcile with. However, as traumatic as her dislocation to the USA may seem, it is not the only source of Rebecca’s traumas. The other sources will be dealt with in the next chapter.

### 1.2.3 Marina: Rape, Power, and Racism

Kaplan argues that the process of defining how a traumatic experience takes place in the brain is complex because the subject's individual psychic history and the context involved in its formation are important to define and understand the traumas the subject suffers and the way he or she deals with them (38-39). This concept is important and helps us to understand Marina, as she presents symptoms of psychological dysfunctions long before her dislocation to the USA.

When her family moves to the US, Marina is left behind with one brother and one sister because there was not enough money for the whole family to leave the country together. As she was a child she interprets their departure as abandonment, even if temporary. Subject to deprivation and undernourishment, she suffers a trauma and develops a dysfunctional behavior. "Highly complex, ... representing the hegemonic ideas of the US and the Dominican Republic concerning gender roles, sexuality, and religion taken to extremes," with these words Dolores A. Ramirez, in a study on race, violence and madness in *Geographies of Home*, describes Marina (3). Because of the complexity of Marina as a character, this chapter deals with her traumatic experiences and their relation with diaspora. In the next chapter I will also discuss other predicaments related to Marina's dysfunctional behavior.

As an adult, Marina is dislocated and does not keep social relations besides those from her home, and a sense of powerlessness permeates her existence. This powerlessness and sense of dislocation which have haunted her since her childhood are manifested in the adoration for her beautiful sister Beatriz. Marina is "fascinated by her (sister's) ability to attract men with cruelty and unabashed flirtation" (Pérez 42). Marina is also extremely submissive to Papito's will and his religious fanaticism. However, she manages to finish high school, find a job in law firms, and is able to save money to buy fashionable clothes, in the



hope that she can attract “an attorney who would support her ...” (Pérez 96). Marina does not accept her family poverty and miserable life and dreams of the same American lifestyle that her sister Rebecca constantly evokes; besides she has an intense wish to find a husband. The need to escape poverty gives her a sense of agency that makes her search for empowerment. The decisive event that gives evidence of Marina’s traumatic experience and subsequent psychological rupture is the rape she is supposed to have suffered by a black astrologer. The textual evidence that this rape occurs is debatable; however, for Marina the rape is real and she experiences a detailed reliving of the event through flashbacks – one of the symptoms of trauma.

Caruth’s definition of post-traumatic symptoms includes a “response to the event (that) occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena” (24). Marina is unremittingly haunted by flashbacks of this alleged rape and also feels olfactory sensations connected to the man who rapes her and the environment of the event as a whole. In this sense, Caruth also explains that flashbacks keep returning to the mind because the traumatic event is not integrated into consciousness. For her, it somehow escapes the subject’s ability to recognize it as part of her memory, and thus it comes back to the mind again and again because it is beyond comprehension. She claims that because of that a trauma cannot be part of one’s narrative memory (151-53). Similarly, Brison suggests that “[t]rauma undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future” (41). For Marina, life stands in a halt after her supposed rape. She is not able to keep up with the normal pace of life and is stuck in the repetition of her trauma. However, as complex as she is, it is premature to affirm that this rape alone triggers Marina’s trauma and psychological dysfunctions. In a previous event in the narrative Marina is “refused” by a young attorney whom she considers a prospective suitor. The narrator

describes Marina's feelings about it: "she ran into the attorney's secretary, a pretty blonde with lipstick bleeding from the edges of her lips. ... Behind the blood red of her closed lids she again saw the scorn on the attorney's face. She also remembered his secretary. And for some reason it was the memory of her green eyes and smiling lips which sent the bitter taste of bile rushing toward her mouth" (Pérez 97-98). Marina sets fire on the papers she is supposed to photocopy, "feeling free of the conventions which had kept her wobbling on a tightrope for fear of plummeting into the abyss she now reached in the quickest blink of an eye" (Pérez 98). This episode makes her lose her job. After that she relaxes her hair and dyes it orange, events that lead us to question the veracity of Marina's account of her "rape," because she is strongly affected by the attorney's refusal of her and the vision of his secretary, who is white and conforms to the standard of American beauty to which Marina aspires. Her attempt to disguise the racial traits that identify her as black in the USA unveils Marina's internalized racism, an element which will be extensively analyzed in the third chapter.

Judith Herman, in a thorough research on trauma, explains that in rape "the purpose of the attack is ... to demonstrate contempt for the victim's autonomy and dignity. The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can *be oneself* in relation to others" (53, author's emphasis, 53). The rape is doubly harmful for Marina because besides the violation of her body, she believes that it was perpetrated by a black man.

Concerning the myth of the black rapist, Angela Y. Davis states that, "[t]he fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality" (182). Additionally, Davis claims that "the myth of the black rapist was a distinctly political invention" (184), and that there is no statistical proof that black men in the US are more prone to rape women in comparison to white men (187). It seems plausible that Marina

might believe in this myth, and accordingly, uses it as the cause of her alleged rape. Her mental breakdown is thus aggravated by the attorney's "refusal" of her.

Marina has a tendency to overeat, and that functions as a means "to stuff full the emptiness inside and to numb her awareness of all that was missing in her life" (Pérez 100). She describes her body as initially being fit and attractive; however, overeating escalates to the post-trauma obesity. This obesity may be connected to guilt. For Herman, in cases of rape, strange as it seems, "it is the victims, not the perpetrators, who feel guilty. Guilt may be understood as an attempt to draw some useful lesson from disaster and regain some sense of power and control" (54). Although Marina never admits it, her overeating may derive from her guilt for having looked for the black astrologer who turned out to be, allegedly, her rapist. Susan Bordo affirms that "the body ... is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed" (165). In this sense, for Marina the body is the channel through which she fulfills the void in her life – the lack of a social life, of love and respect from her family; the unfulfilled American dream; freedom. Besides, she feels she is unlovable because she was left behind in the Dominican Republic. Her internalized racism also contributes to her self-depreciation since childhood and culminates with her feeling of failure for not being able to belong in a society that she has fantasized about. All these aspects lead to her social trauma. Equally important is the punctual trauma of her alleged rape. On that issue, Herman claims that, "psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless" (32). Marina's alleged rape adds to her disempowerment. Throughout her life she tries to reverse this condition, either by trying to pass as white, by clinging to religion, or by trying to attract white, wealthy Americans to marry her. The final blow comes through the rape, which is the highest expression of powerlessness. In her discussion about trauma, Herman points out that "traumatic life events,

like other misfortunes, are especially merciless to those who are already troubled” (60). For Marina, this traumatic event is magnified in face of her psychic history.

As Marina fails to achieve power, these problems lead to a faster splitting of her mind for she negates her body, her identity and herself. This turning against the self is discussed by Rosanne Kennedy, who argues that, “contradiction between self-identity and identity as Other results in self-alienation” (91). All things considered, Marina is incapable of reconciling with herself after her dislocation to the USA. Her traumatic supposed rape seems to be closely related to her psychic history and the ordeals she faces in the US, namely, the estrangement diaspora brings forth, poverty, and the inability to live between the social norms of the Dominican Republic and those of the US. All contribute to destroy a possible sense of self and of agency, aggravating her fragmentation. These predicaments add to the alleged rape and trigger her psychosis.

#### **1.2.4 Iliana: Resiliency and Spirituality**

Iliana is the youngest daughter and a rather complex character. Against all odds she manages to go to the university to escape her family problems. She is darker than Marina; however, she does not develop an internalized racism. Iliana’s life is permeated by a void which resides in a connection with her mother because she inherits Aurelia’s spiritual powers. However, because of her father’s religion the discussion of such topic at home is forbidden. Additionally, Iliana cannot trespass the barriers between herself and her mother, although she is the daughter closest to Aurelia, who “wanted to learn of the past of which they rarely spoke. She also wanted to borrow from both (her parents) the strength she saw reflected in their eyes” (44). The life narratives she misses are connected to her grandmother, Bienvenida, and to Aurelia’s spiritual powers, which are significant for Iliana because, like her mother,

she is the only woman in the family to whom these powers are bestowed. Iliana also resents her parents' preference for Beatriz and Tico when they were children. Along this line, Layton demonstrates that there is an important connection between primary caretakers and the fragmentation one presents in adulthood (108). In this sense, for Iliana, Aurelia's silence and Papito's violence towards her is hard to bear, mainly because she believes they overprotect her youngest siblings. She feels that her family's dysfunctional behavior is related to her parents' denial of problems and their silence about their past. Iliana's sense of self is also shaken by interrogations concerning her gender because her body does not conform to the standards of femininity defined by the social codes of both the Dominican Republic and the USA. As Susan Bordo states, "[t]he body – what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture" (165). Iliana wears clothes which disguise her thin body. Her body is thus inscribed as the type of medium of culture Bordo explains above.

Iliana is an outsider within her family and within the US society. She feels dislocated because she is identified either as a Latina or as a black, as I shall discuss in detail in Chapter 3. Without a sense of belonging to either the Dominican Republic or the USA, Iliana is groundless and the feeling of displacement pervades her life. Although she is aware of all these complicating issues, she still believes that her family problems might be resolved and that is why she returns home after studying eighteen months at the university. Nevertheless, her parents' unconscious denial of Rebecca's and Marina's psychological dysfunctions lead to Iliana's tragic rape, perpetrated by Marina, who survives a third suicide attempt and is diagnosed as "bipolar manic-depressive" that "exhibited symptoms of schizophrenia" (Pérez 219).

In her delusions, Marina remembers facts she heard of in the Dominican Republic, of "children born ... with both male and female organs" and she concludes that Iliana can be "a

child ... born with male organs tucked inside” (277). In her psychosis she thus believes that Iliana is a man hiding his penis. For Marina the proof of the existence of a penis comes from a number of details such as:

Those hands were too large for a girl; “the width of her sister’s shoulders; the lack of sexual tension between Ed and Iliana; her gait ... had the exaggerated walk of a man imitating a woman ... If such were the case with Iliana, it would be the reason why she’d never had a boyfriend, expressed no interest in marrying or bearing children, and appeared at moments like a woman but at others like a man. It would also account for why her parents, sensing that she was different, allowed her more freedom than they had granted their other girls (275-77).

As a result, in one of the most remarkable and striking scenes of the novel, Marina violates her sister’s body with her fist, as an attempt to find the penis. By acknowledging the significant traumatic consequences of Marina’s alleged rape, I understand her violation of her sister’s body as a replication of her own violation and an attempt not to be rendered powerless. Marina sees Iliana as a man, similar to the one who terrified her, that is, a black one. For her this man embodies evil and when they (Marina and Iliana) are at a restaurant with Ed Marina speaks to Iliana: “‘I know you,’ she informs her sister as the waitress belatedly brings their drinks. ‘I know exactly what you are’” (279). After her last suicide attempt, Marina also comes to believe that she has seen God, and that He has ordered her to look for and find her sister’s penis, “[h]is voice murmured in her ear, reassuring her of His love and leaving her with no doubt as to what it was He would have her to do” (Pérez 278). As fear and distrust escalate in her mind, the way to escape the state of powerlessness that pervaded her life would be by depriving the supposed attacker of his weapon: the penis.

Ann J. Cahill argues that, “rape enforces a systematic (i.e., consistent, although not necessarily conscious), sexualized means of control of women”. For her, shifting the traditional definition of rape as something a man does usually with his penis to something a woman experiences would bring more light to the discussion on rape (45). So, by extension, Marina’s arm becomes a “penis” that replicates the violation she believes she has been submitted to, although she is neither conscious of that, nor does the rape has a sexual connotation for her. It is, as Cahill emphasizes, all about power, a desperate delusionary attempt to reverse her own rape by a black man, the moment she thinks rendered her completely powerless. Layton, similarly, adds that “[t]he victim of repeated abuse tends to split the world into victims, abusers, and rescuers, who are locked in a dialectical dance. S/he enacts and reenacts relational patterns wherein s/he is sometimes the victim, sometimes the abuser, and sometimes the rescuer” (113). Thus, Marina reenacts her own violation in an attempt to subjugate the perpetrator, the black man, and invert the roles of victim-abuser.

For Iliana, terror does come twice, because Marina attacks her a second time. Iliana displays the initial symptoms of trauma by denying that something serious has occurred, as she affirms: ““She didn’t do anything to me”” (Pérez 286). On commenting about denial, Herman claims that:

These alterations of consciousness are at the heart of constriction or numbing, the third cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder...situations of inescapable danger may evoke not only terror and rage but also, paradoxically, a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve.... The person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, ... as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken. ... This altered state of

consciousness might be regarded as one of nature's small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain (42-43).

The second time, she realizes what Marina's intent was and that allows Iliana to overcome her own suffering to understand her sister's mental condition: "It was her sister who needed to be pitied, her sister who'd lost her mind and had no sway over the tenets of her own soul" (Pérez 287). Iliana's resilience is extremely important at this moment as it spares her of the symptoms her sister presents, because "[e]motionally, Iliana is the stronger of the two. She knows this now. Besides, her sister has not meant her any harm. It is her madness which has lashed out – a destructive madness incapable of making distinctions" (Pérez 287). About this matter, I quote Roberta F. Apfel and Bennett Simon who define resiliency as "the capacity to survive violence and loss, and moreover to have flexibility of response over the course of a life time. The inner experience of such behavioral flexibility includes a sense of capacity to choose – among courses of action and among conflicting moral values" (103). In dealing with Iliana's resilience, we come to know in the end of the novel and through Aurelia's viewpoint that Iliana bears the same power and strength as her grandmother, and these two features lead her to acknowledge her rape, which is the first step towards healing.

Although she is aware of the difficulty of having bonds with her siblings and parents after her rape, Iliana forgives her father because she understands his own sense of failure regarding his children. Although she does not fully comprehend her legacy, Iliana is able to face her rape, the racism and gender discrimination she suffers and her father's religious fanaticism to pursue an education that would enable her to get a position in society different from those accessible to her sisters who are simply domestic and factory workers. She understands she has to leave her home to have the chance to return.



### 1.2.5 The Consequences of Diaspora in *Geographies of Home*

The women characters in *Geographies of Home* go through a dislocation from their homeland to the US that cause their subjectivity fragmentation. The circumstances underlying these fragmentations play a significant role in triggering traumas for these characters. The cultural clash, the feeling of displacement, the disconnection from her roots in the Dominican Republic, and their poverty are crucial for the development of Aurelia's depression and dependency on the patriarchal figure. However, rebirth becomes possible for Aurelia at the moment she acknowledges that it is not possible to go on living without a past, or roots, as they make part of both her life and family. For Rebecca, the impossibility of getting a formal citizenship and rights, which usually result in the difficulty of adjustment, and the recognition that the American dream is over, pervade her life and make her lose her self-esteem and surrender her agency to the abusive men in her life. As for Marina, two main ordeals cause the fragmentation of her subjectivity: abandonment in the Dominican Republic and the racist discourse that identifies her as black in the US. All these factors, added to the low self-esteem resulting from the process of painful fragmentation, throw her into the state of psychosis in the context of which the alleged rape takes place. As for Iliana, dislocation is present inside and outside her home. The clash of two cultural backgrounds, the racism she encounters throughout her life, her poverty, her parents' lack of agency in face of the family's troubles all contribute to make Iliana feel like an outsider in the USA. The violation she is submitted to inside the space in which she is supposed to feel safe and protected is deeply traumatic. Nevertheless, her resilience enables her to gradually respond healthily to her predicaments. By acknowledging the vulnerabilities in her siblings and parents, she finds her strength, which is the starting point for constructing a new path and understanding her own self.

## 2.1 Trauma and Diaspora in *Dreaming in Cuban*

*Dreaming in Cuban* contrasts with *Geographies of Home* in the sense that trauma is not only a result of diaspora, but also its cause, which is reinforced by Kamboureli's theory on trauma in diaspora discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In *Dreaming in Cuban* dislocation also marks the lives of the characters. There are two diasporic women characters in the novel, Lourdes and her daughter Pilar. Lourdes is also a complex character, as several are the facets of her traumatic experiences. She presents a process of fragmentation that goes back to her birth, when her mother Celia rejects her because of a serious depression, a topic that I extensively discuss in my analysis of the traumas related to the family problems in the Chapter 2. This trauma has a key role in Lourdes's fragmentation and on her distorted view of reality.

In the narrative, Lourdes only admits her father into her world. For her, Celia, her mother, means abandonment, and Jorge, her father, love and support; there are no other meanings in her relationship with her parents. In adulthood Lourdes admits that she "is herself only with her father. Even after his death, they understand each other perfectly, as they always have" (Garcia131). This connection is strong and does not last only in the dimension of life, for after her father's death they still talk about Lourdes's past and present issues. Regarding Lourdes's relationship with Felicia, her sister, I would say that it is marked by intolerance and selfishness, as she does not allow any space for Jorge to interact with her sister.

### 2.1.1 Lourdes in Diaspora

Lourdes's dislocation to the USA occurs for political and personal reasons. Her mother Celia and her sister Felicia remain in Cuba and Lourdes immigrates with her husband Rufino Puente and her daughter Pilar. After the Castro Revolution wins, Lourdes loses her properties and she decides to immigrate to the USA. And yet, she expects to go back to Cuba soon, as she believes that its political situation would be reversed by a US intervention. As Pilar remembers, "[w]e lived in a hotel in Manhattan for five months while my parents waited for the revolution to fail or for the Americans to intervene" (Garcia 32). Lourdes is originally from the low middle class, but as she marries Rufino, a man from a wealthy and powerful family, she joins the dominant class that controls economy and politics in Cuba.

The Castro revolution is traumatizing for her because it takes away from Lourdes an entire world of empowerment. As she works in the ranch and modernizes it, she does not accept the revolution because it takes possession of properties, land, and money and wealth that at that time belonged to a small privileged group of people. In relation to the dislocation of Cubans, Franklin Knight affirms that:

Approximately 200,000 persons joined the exodus from Cuba in the first three years of the revolution, many, no doubt, thinking that they were undertaking a temporary sojourn. The immigration decimated the ranks of the wealthy and skilled, created a shortage among various occupations, and weakened public administration. But it also cleared out the vast majority of the disaffected, making powerless the counterrevolution. After 1961, the revolution could no longer be overthrown from within (246-47).

Thus, Lourdes's temporary exile becomes permanent, and although she has relatives in Florida she prefers going north to escape "the competition for dishwasher jobs," (Garcia 69) and also to put a greater distance between herself and Cuba.

A second trauma Lourdes undergoes derives also from the revolution and increases her resentment towards Cuba. Soon after Castro's revolution wins, Lourdes, who is pregnant, after a riding accident and a confrontation with two of Castro's soldiers, loses her baby. The event results in Lourdes's rape by one of the soldiers. After that he scratches hieroglyphics on Lourdes's belly with his knife. All these events are symbolic because they represent a feeling of loss on several levels, namely, the loss of the properties, the loss of the baby, the violation on the body. As for the latter, she not only loses control over her own body, but also has a permanent inscription that perpetuates the memory of all the many losses always alive on her mind.

In the USA, Lourdes goes north because she only feels safe in the coldness of New York which works as a shield as she has to wear coats, that is, "layers (that) protect her" (73). For Lourdes, the numbing symptomatic of traumatic experiences as described by Herman comes through the cold weather and its possibilities of protection. Additionally, she tries to erase the event from her mind. In the narrative it is clear that only her father knows about the rape, although he only unveils it in a conversation with Lourdes after his death. This may lead to the conclusion that she never told anybody anything about the rape.

As she arrives in New York she gains 118 pounds and divides her time between her bakery and having sex with her husband. Lourdes's process of fragmentation manifests itself in her intense desire to fill her emptiness through overeating and having sex, as the narrator shows in this passage: "Lourdes did not battle her cravings; rather, she submitted to them like a somnambulist to a dream. ... Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what" (21). In line with Bordo's theory about the cultural

inscriptions on the body, Lourdes's, like Marina's, becomes a symbol in which several elements are inscribed, all of them converging to her losses and consequent traumas.

Herman states that “[t]rauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately.... The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others.” She adds that “[t]raumatic events ... shatter the sense of connection between individual and community” (55-56). Lourdes's craving for sex seems to be the solution for her to fulfill all the losses she goes through. Besides, Lourdes' rape is, as Marina's, a matter of power. The soldiers' first attempt to reclaim the ranch for the revolution fails because Lourdes confronts them and makes them leave her property. The soldier who rapes her is from the lower classes, and during her rape she identifies his origin: “She felt his calloused palm, ... she smelled the soldier's coarse soap, ... his milky clots and the decay of his teeth” (Garcia 71). The rape becomes more traumatic because it is perpetrated by a member of the lower classes and as such, it is emblematic of all her losses. Regarding the aim of rape, Herman adds that, “[t]he essential element of rape is the physical, psychological, and moral violation of the person... The purpose of the rapist is to terrorize, dominate, and humiliate his victim, to render her completely helpless” (58). For Lourdes's rapist, to be commanded by a woman who comes from a superior class is doubly humiliating, thus raping her, and leaving its indelible marks on her as well, is the way he finds to invert the dichotomy power-powerlessness.

In the USA Lourdes owns a bakery and employs other less fortunate immigrants; however, in her authoritarian character she oppresses them and is incapable of understanding the hardships they go through. Besides, she has neither friends, nor a social life other than her work at the bakery. Furthermore, she claims to have been assimilated in the adopted country, but being there does not make her reconcile with her own personal conflicts. On the contrary, her inability to deal with them in the experience of displacement is magnified and her traumas

are also aggravated. For her, the taking over of her possessions by Castro's government signifies the end of the world as she knows it: she loses her wealth and the power of bossing people around her.

Her rape by a revolutionary is the blow that completes the shattering of her world and of her mind. Her escape to the USA does not heal her pain; she does not reconcile with her mother, who supports Castro's ideas and government. In addition, she does not talk about her traumas, and this fact makes Pilar ignorant of her mother's situation. Lourdes's diasporic movement originates from her attempt to escape from her traumas and fragmentation, but she is not successful. Even though she claims to have been assimilated in the US culture, she does that to deny the pain she believes Cuba has inflicted on her through Castro's ascension to power, his taking of private properties, and as a consequence, her rape and her baby's death.

### **2.1.2 The Search for the Self: Pilar**

Pilar feels displaced in the USA, and although she leaves Cuba at a very early age, she has memories of her time there, as we see in this passage: "[I] was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby" (Garcia 26). In addition, she has a telepathic connection with her grandmother Celia, who supports her and advises her on her problems. Pilar cannot understand Lourdes's authoritarian way of treating her, nor her mother's hatred of Cuba because she is unaware of Lourdes's past traumas. Pilar feels that her father is also dislocated in the USA, but they do not discuss this issue at home. She tries to express herself through painting; the questions about herself and her connection with Cuba are reflected in her art: "My paintings have been getting more and more abstract lately, violent-looking, with clotted swirls of red" (Garcia 29).

Pilar's telepathic connection with Celia helps her construct a sense of self. However, this conversation also ends after some years. Pilar reflects about how Cuba slowly starts to get distant from her: "I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, which dictate the memories we'll have when we are old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me; my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (Garcia 138). Celia, painting and music give Pilar an emotional support to live in the USA. She also has her father's support, but Rufino is also dislocated in the USA, thus, he is unable to help Pilar construct a strong connection with her homeland.

A turning point that takes Pilar back to Cuba is her decision to enter a botanica. The santero identifies Pilar as a daughter of Changó and tells her, "you must finish what you began" (Garcia 200). On her way to the university she undergoes another form of trauma: she is chased by some teenagers, who hold her under an elm, and by placing a knife on her throat, force her to allow them to suckle her breasts. However, she feels the elm supporting her and she tries to understand the reason behind the teenagers' deed. This event, although it is apparently a violation of Pilar's body, serves as a metaphor for nurturing, for connecting with nature, represented by the elm and the herbs the santero gives her. Pilar bathes with them and paints for eight days on end. These two events happen on the same night and open a path to her past and help her decide to go back to Cuba with Lourdes and to take control over her future. The events of that night represent for Pilar a bridge over the state of being in-between two worlds, without roots in none of them, pointing to the beginning of her self-discovery.

### 2.1.3 The Outcomes of Trauma in Diaspora in *Geographies of Home and Dreaming in Cuban*

Lourdes and Marina share a few similarities in relation to the origin of their traumas, namely, the abandonment they feel and the rape they suffer; however, Lourdes's mental disorder does not escalate to madness mainly because of their different psychic history, their cultural backgrounds, and their socio-economic status. The means through which both women have to survive in the USA are different. Although Lourdes is described as being "dark," she is not discriminated as Marina is. Lourdes is used to exerting control over everything around her. For Marina powerlessness pervades. Lourdes experiences traumatic events like Celia's abandoning her, her loss of social status, and the rape; however, she does not end up psychotic as Marina because her self-esteem is not as low as Marina's. Lourdes does not open up to Celia when she returns to Cuba, and as the latter dies, the readers are not told how Celia's death affects Lourdes. She helps her nephew Ivanito escape to the USA. For her it represents taking some control over the events in her life, and in Cuba's life, which gives her a feeling of empowerment. For her, it is a victory over Castro, whom she accounts responsible for the death of her unborn baby and her rape. Besides, Ivanito seems to represent a possible replacement of her lost child and a hope of healing.

It may be argued that Pilar and Iliana are on the same search for their subjectivities in the ruptures with the family connections, in the telepathic conversations with their ancestors, the former with her grandmother, the latter with her mother. Both women depart from a stage of painful fragmentation through separation, disconnection, and a lack of family narratives that would connect them with their homelands, their past history, and their mothers and grandmothers. In this process they become empowered by spiritual forces that originate from their foremothers and from their homelands.



In both novels the diasporic movements the women characters undergo are closely connected to the traumas they suffer, either as a consequence or as their cause. These traumas make the diasporic women characters relate noticeably to each other, but they also differ significantly from one another as their stories provide different outcomes for their traumas. Although most of the women characters who immigrate manage to fight and survive in the host land, the feeling of homelessness and estrangement diaspora brings forth comes to add to other predicaments they suffer as women, which evolve in traumas of various levels that end up in mental disorders for Rebecca, Marina, and Lourdes. This claim confirms Layton's assertion that fragmentation can cause pain and result in traumas. In contrast, for Aurelia, Iliana and Pilar, although they also experience traumatic experiences of different sorts, their predicaments turn out to have a positive result because of their resilience, their self-esteem, and the connections they have with their past in their homelands. This last element has a key role in opening doors to their many selves, to their foremothers' voices and power, and to the realization that they can be hybrid – as defended by Friedman – taking control over their many subjectivities forged by the blending of two cultures.

## CHAPTER 2

### Narratives of Trauma

In the first chapter of this research I claim that social contexts are fundamental for the process of subjectivity construction and that for the diasporic women characters their dislocation to the US is crucial in causing traumas or adding to them. Equally important are the traumas closely connected with the characters' life stories and the codes of behavior that patriarchal society expects them to fulfill. The traumas resulting from the experiences they undergo as women who have to survive in a repressive society – be it the dictatorial regimes in their home countries or the powerful patriarchal society in which they are inserted – lead to mental disorders in various levels. As a result, as shown previously, some of them suffer from melancholia, depression, eating and sexual disorders, madness and schizophrenia. Brown contends that a feminist analysis of trauma and its causes should ask: “how many layers of trauma are being peeled off by what appears initially to be only one traumatic event or process?... Social context, and the individual's personal history within that social context, can lend traumatic meaning to events that might be only sad or troubling in another time and space” (110). She claims that according to feminist therapy – a philosophy of psychotherapy that draws upon a feminist analysis to understand and intervene in human distress – personality is constructed in interaction with the internal individual experiences and with the social context in which she lives (103). Along this line of thought, in this chapter I analyze the various experiences and predicaments that lead to traumas for Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina and Iliana, in *Geographies of Home*, and Celia, Felicia, Lourdes and Pilar, in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

These women are involved in traumatic situations which also need to be analyzed through their childhood's experiences, their family history, their sexual experiences and the socio-political and historical situations they undergo. Proceeding with this investigation, I will

now carry out a discussion on the factors mentioned above by analyzing the political and social context in the Dominican Republic and in Cuba and their relation to the characters' subjectivities construction.

## **2.1 The Political Context of *Geographies of Home***

Rafael Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic in a dictatorship that is considered one of the longest in Latin America – from 1930 to 1961 – and instituted himself as a type of feudal overlord of the nation. In a study on *Geographies of Home*, Cristiane Fontinha Alcântara states about that period: “crucial events have been inscribed into the psyches of citizens” (18). In the novel, the narrator tells in flashbacks the events that take place in the Dominican Republic and the characters' memories of Trujillo's times are always haunted by terror in spite of their successful escape from the country.

Lauren Derby, in her study of the Dominican Republic in the era of Trujillo, states that he incorporated the role of “Padre de la patria nueva” (Father of the New Homeland), creating a language of paternalism that combines affect and power which is deeply rooted in the imaginary of the country. He controlled all the country's resources, institutionalized forms of everyday terror, and in one of his bloodiest deeds, ordered the slaughter of thousands of Haitians in an attempt to cleanse his nation of blackness (2-5). Rape, perpetrated by Trujillo's men, was a common practice as well. Along these lines, Herman states that feminists “redefined rape as a crime of violence rather than a sexual act...a method of political control, enforcing the subordination of women through terror” (30). In this sense, the rapes perpetrated by Trujillo's men were deeply symbolic of the violence and political terror that were installed in the island.

Derby claims that the population was forced to display photographs of Trujillo in their homes and businesses. In *Geographies of Home*, there is a reference to this practice, in which Papito recalls the terror he experiences when the government inspectors come to the house he lives with Aurelia and his children. Clinging to his faith in God, he expects a miracle:

In defiance of the dictatorship responsible for the death of family and friends, he refused to hang a portrait of Trujillo in his home. ... The soldiers had stormed past him to halt before a portrait of him and his wife on their wedding day. One of them had smiled approvingly while pointing under the portrait to a shelf on which stood the unlit candles reserved for blackouts. “Excellent,” he had exclaimed, although Trujillo was nowhere in the portrait and there were no burning candles anywhere in sight. “I’m glad to see candles lit in honor of El Capitán!” (Pérez 147).

Similarly to the famous image of the Big Brother in Orwell’s *1984*, Trujillo imposed his quasi-omniscient presence in each of his citizens’ mind, terrorizing and keeping them under his control. He also created many myths about himself. A major one is that of the “tiguer,” the image of a man similar to the Brazilian “malandro,” a hypersexualized rogue, usually of mixed descent, who comes from the lower class and ascends to power through cunning and deceit. According to Derby, this image restituted the pride the emasculated Dominican men had lost with the American invasion – in the 1920s – and the cultural changes it brought forth. As a result of this ideological manipulation of Trujillo’s imagery, these men were led to identify with him, especially those of the lower classes (174-75). Derby adds that “[l]ike Marie Antoinette, Trujillo had many bodies, which were variously represented through the women of the regime. Feminine imagery functioned as a foil for the dictator’s multiple masculine identities; each female relationship revealed a different facet of his power (111). In

this way, Trujillo reinforced the image of woman as ornamental, representative of man's force, glory, and sexual conquest.

The other significant image of Trujillo that was constantly evoked was that of the father of the nation. In order to construct it he used his daughter, Angelita, proclaiming her queen of the World's Fair in 1955. Embodying an angelical role because of her young age and reserved personality, she would become a representation of purity and subservience – an image connected to the nation's patron saint, the Virgin of Altagracia (Derby 131). This subservience would be expressed through the image of the daughter disciplined by the father. Thus, Trujillo solidified his image as father of the nation with the daughter as the symbol of his manhood and authority (Derby 131). It may be said that Trujillo succeeded in subjugating men through fear and admiration. As for women, they were entrapped in the roles of daughters or sexual preys. Both images keep women in a dependent and helpless state in which they have no choice but to obey and serve the will of the master, be it the father or the husband. The image of the father, in special, is relevant for my analysis because the head of the family in *Geographies of Home*, named "Papito," can be seen as a metaphor for patriarchal power, an image that refers back to the one embodied by Trujillo.

### **2.1.1 Trauma and Acquiescence: Aurelia**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the women characters in *Geographies of Home* present dysfunctional behaviors related to the traumas they suffer. As Shoshana Felman claims: "every woman's life contains, explicitly or in implicit ways, the story of a trauma" (16). The first ones I analyze under this assumption are the traumas suffered by the matriarch Aurelia.

Aurelia marries Papito in the scenario described above. As mentioned in the first chapter, Aurelia relinquishes her spiritual legacy and relies on her husband for guiding their family. Through an analysis of her past, it is possible to find the reasons for her attitude. The presence of terror as part of her regular life, the subjugation of the nation under Trujillo, added to extreme poverty, all evidence that Aurelia suffers a “social trauma,” as defined by Forter in my discussion of the theories on trauma. Equally important is the trauma Aurelia goes through after the suicide of her brother Virgilio, a turning point in her life. As Bienvenida, Aurelia’s mother, is close to her death, she wants Aurelia to take possession of her legacy; however, Aurelia refuses to do so, as we may infer from the following quote:

Aurelia considered what her mother had already bequeathed to her: an ability to perceive the invisible that only she and Virgilio, from among their siblings, had inherited. This ability was what had driven her brother mad and tormented her into seeing and hearing what others couldn’t. Having witnessed Virgilio’s end, she had vowed not to follow in his path or even in her mother’s. For this reason she had converted to her husband’s religion and had shared with him little of her past (Pérez 134).

As discussed in the first chapter, death may result in trauma. Following this line of thought, I see Virgilio’s death as a source of trauma for Aurelia, especially because they are closely related and for her negative reactions towards it. On discussing about the effects of traumas resulting from familial relationships, Herman argues that traumatic events “breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (51). For the young Aurelia, her brother’s suicide disrupts her sense of security, brings forth fear, and destroys her basic trust

on her mother. As Bienvenida shows her the quilt she had made with pieces of clothing that had belonged to deceased family members, she asks Aurelia:

“Do you recognize this?” she asked, sitting beside her youngest daughter and draping the quilt between their laps. . . . Aurelia’s hand froze on the faded patch of green. It had been years since she had allowed herself to think about that brother, equally long since anyone had voiced his name. Yes. She recognized the fabric. . . . Recognized it although the shirt it had been stripped from must have been washed and scrubbed and bleached to remove the red that had soaked it through – a red bright enough to stain her sight so that for weeks after her brother’s suicide everything her eyes had seen had been filtered through their memory of blood (Pérez 131).

Aurelia’s connection with her mother is destroyed because she attributes Virgilio’s violent death to the power of hearing voices of spirits they both inherit from Bienvenida, although there is no clearly stated explanation for her brother’s behavior . Her trauma symptoms are manifest through numbing – Herman’s third cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (42) – and in the effort to forget Virgilio, despite her mother’s continuous pleas for her to keep the memories of their past and ancestors. Aurelia is, at first, unable to comprehend the essence of her mother’s quest, what she actually succeeds in doing in the end of the novel after Marina’s third suicide attempt. Thus, she chooses to rely on Papito because he and the Adventist religion give her the sense of safety she had lost. In the following passage, it is clear that this dependence on him is something that comes from her initiative: “In the past, whenever misfortune had crept into their lives, she had leaned on him for support. . . . Should one of their children have required discipline, she had waited for him to administer it when he came home from work. . . . Had they been about to be evicted, had a

daughter chosen an inappropriate spouse or a son gotten himself into trouble, she had depended on him for solutions” (Pérez 146).

Subsequently, as a mother, Aurelia tries to shield her children from the dangers of life, either in the Dominican Republic or in the US, and overprotects some of them, especially Rebecca and Marina. The outcome of this overprotection will be discussed in my analysis of both characters in the sections ahead. In what concerns Iliana, her youngest daughter, Aurelia sees the same spiritual ability she has; however, she chooses to remain silent about it, denying her daughter the knowledge she craves for, and which could answer many of her interrogations. Nevertheless, Aurelia’s submission to Papito is somewhat paradoxical as she, on the one hand, complies with the power he exerts on her but, on the other, reacts against his orders, and influences him to take different directions on matters related to their children. She also protects them from his rage, and allows them to do things he forbids them to do, as in the case of Iliana, who goes out unescorted to meet her friend Ed at night. Aurelia’s religious devotion is not profound because she sometimes avoids going to the Adventist church, as Iliana mentions. It is in a way a rebellious behavior that supports my previous statement and gives evidence that she is clearly defying Papito’s faith. Moreover, Aurelia has telepathic conversations with Iliana about family issues, when the latter is away at the university, and also keeps her connected to the past. The passage below allows us to visualize this facet of Aurelia’s:

“Get thee behind me, Satan,” she had commanded the voice, relying, without conviction, on the exhortation she had been taught repelled evil spirits.

“Stop that foolishness, Iliana María!”



The voice was her mother's – authoritative but hinting mischief as when she had taught her to dance merengue on a Sabbath morning while the rest of the family attended church (Pérez 2).

It is my belief that Aurelia acquiesces to Papito's impositions and power because they restore the sense of safety and guidance she used to feel with her mother in her youth. Besides, relying on him for the guidance of the family is a safe harbor which helps her confront various hardships at the time her family immigrates to the US, and it is also a sort of escape from something she cannot understand, that is, her own subjectivity, especially when it refers to her connection with her mother's powers.

Moreover, we cannot rule out the possibility that Aurelia's traumatic experiences may have influenced her children, especially in the cases of Rebecca, Marina and Iliana. Studies demonstrate that parents may transmit the memories of traumatic events they undergo. I believe that it is possible that Aurelia might have transmitted her traumas and fears to her daughters. In his study on "social trauma," Forter claims that:

children can inherit affective dispositions, 'memories,' and even knowledge of traumatic events that they did not experience directly... it's clear, however, that the transmission in question takes place not through some mythic genetic inheritance but through the emotional and body "language" of the parents. ... in other words (they) unconsciously convey to the child a host of meanings that the child cannot process; they thereby implant in him or her traumatogenic possibilities that are real in the sense of being grounded in the parents' experience, but do not have the status of events that the child must actually have witnessed (265).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Aurelia undergoes a nine-month depression in the US. It seems plausible to me that the depression, added to the trauma of her brother's suicide, the fears she experiences afterwards, and the suffering resulting from the terror and the harsh conditions she goes through in her home land could have been passed on to her daughters. Aurelia takes these traumas to the US and they add to the trauma that diaspora brings forth. In the next section the discussion on Rebecca will point out some examples that might corroborate this claim.

### **2.1.2 Cooped up in Patriarchy: Rebecca**

As portrayed in *Geographies of Home*, in patriarchal societies women are raised to fulfill a specific gender role. Felman affirms that: "From her initial upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of serving an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/ a mother/ a wife" (21). All the characters analyzed here are expected to fulfill the social role Felman describes above. Rebecca, however, is the one who responds to it in very disturbing ways. As Aurelia's second child is born, Bienvenida decides to take Rebecca, the eldest, to live with her to help Aurelia recover from the birth. Bienvenida warns Aurelia about Rebecca as soon as she is born: "Be patient with her".... This child has a very rough road ahead" (213). Although very little is said about the strong influence Bienvenida exerts on Rebecca in relation to the former's view of the world and of herself, the passage below reveals that:

As a girl in the Dominican Republic she had taken for granted that her future would unfold as effortlessly and satisfyingly as it often had in dreams. Raised by her grandmother from the age of two until she was eight and able to help care for her younger siblings, she had spent the

greater part of her childhood convinced that she was special as Bienvenida had led her to believe and resentful of her parents for seeming to be ignorant of that fact (205).

Rebecca's childish view of reality and distorted image of herself would develop into conformism and passivity as she grows old. And why does Rebecca develop such conformist attitudes?

In her article "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," Nancy Chodorow's claims that "certain features of the mother-daughter relationship are internalized universally as basic elements of feminine ego structure (although not necessarily what we normally mean by 'femininity')" (44). Additionally, she argues that "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (44). The connection between mother and daughter discussed in Chodorow's theory is significant in that it provides the basis for the development of feminine subjectivity. It seems to me that Chodorow's previous quote might explain Rebecca's lack of self-esteem and confidence because her subjectivity depends on emotional ties with others – initially with her grandmother, who makes her feel special, and later with men whom she expects to make her feel in the same way. As a consequence, instead of developing her own sense of self, Rebecca expects others to fulfill her emotional needs, resulting later in her full dependence on the men with whom she gets involved.

Despite her traveling to the US on her own to help her family immigrate, Rebecca does not see herself as a woman who can fully experience her subjectivity without a husband. Traditions associated to the family religious beliefs determine that marriage is the only way for women to achieve a respectable position within their constrained social role. Besides, Rebecca expects to live the expected "American dream" with Pasión, as this passage illustrates: "Pasión was also an American citizen with what she had perceived as infinite

possibilities of wealth” (Pérez 55). As her expectations are not fulfilled, Rebecca experiences a continuous sense of failure, as the example below demonstrates:

So little had turned out the way she had expected. As the eldest daughter she should have been the first to marry, to bear children, to be sufficiently settled to provide her sisters with words of wisdom and advice. Instead, she had suffered the humiliation of watching two of them marry before she herself had any prospects. She had primped in anticipation of the day when she too would leave her parents’ house with her head held high (Pérez 203).

Rebecca’s concern evokes traditional norms derived from the Bible. The biblical text states that the youngest daughters should wait until the eldest finds a suitable husband to get married. Thus, a feeling of frustration involves Rebecca as her two relationships — with Samuel and Pasión — fail. Both men beat her, and keeping her relation with Pasión means her and their children’s starvation. Chodorow’s theory explains at least part of Rebecca’s passivity in face of such sort of abuse because she does not develop any self-esteem or autonomy. Along with Chodorow’s line of thought, Judith M. Bardwick and Elizabeth Douvan claim that girls, differently from boys, “are not encouraged to give up old techniques (dependent behavior) of relating to adults and using others to define their identity, to manipulate the physical world and to supply their emotional needs” (226). The two authors add that:

Unless in early life the girl exhibited the activity, aggression, or sexuality usually displayed by boys, and thereby experienced significant parental prohibitions, there is little likelihood that she will develop independent sources of esteem that refer back to herself. Instead, the loss of love remains for her the gravest source of injury to

the self and, predictably, she will not gamble with that critical source of esteem (230).

Both scholars claim that the behavior described above leads to conformism in women.

Accordingly, they “remain compliant and particularly amenable to molding by the culture” (228). Bardwick and Douvan still claim that “in the absence of independent and objective achievements, girls and women know their worth only from others’ responses, know their identities only from their relationships as daughters, girlfriends, wives, or mothers and, in a literal sense, personalize the world” (231). It seems to me that Chodorow’s and Bardwick and Douvan’s theories provide a plausible explanation for Rebecca’s conformism because she is used to defining herself in relation to others and is not encouraged to be independent. Therefore, she is not autonomous and does not develop her self-esteem to a level high enough to encourage her to stand up and fight conformism. She cannot risk losing a relationship which constitutes her source of esteem – Pasión – even if living with him results in accepting physical violence, abuse and starvation.

Rebecca’s compliance with oppression, I think, is rather complex, first because she does not develop any self-esteem and, secondly, because in the society she is brought up in the Dominican Republic marriage is considered the only way a woman can achieve the so-called respectability Rebecca craves for. Even after immigrating to the US, the cultural norms internalized during her youth in her homeland still determine her behavior. Consequently, Rebecca acquiesces to those impaired patriarchal norms internalized by means of her upbringing because that was the way the cultural-social context in which she lived prepared her to behave: as a wife and a mother.

Another complicating factor that intervenes in Rebecca’s behavior is the sexual repression reproduced within her family and the society she belongs to. It has been a common means of controlling women’s behavior in patriarchal societies and it becomes a

cause for traumas and mental disorders for many of them. Rebecca is driven by her sexual impulses since her teens, when she would leave her house and find quiet places where she would masturbate. Although Aurelia is aware of the perils Rebecca would be exposed to, mainly possible abductions and rape (Pérez 213), mother and daughter never talk about such issues because sex and sexuality, is viewed as taboo in the family. Marilena Chauí defines sexual repression as “the system of norms, rules, laws and implicit values established by a society concerning permission and prohibition of sexual practices. These rules, norms, laws, values are defined explicitly by religious beliefs, moral rules, the law system and by science as well” (77, my translation). Rebecca’s sexuality is explicitly defined but constrained by the rules and laws Chauí theorizes about. Although she is not openly repressed by Aurelia, she is led to get a husband as it is the socially acceptable way of exercising her sexuality. Rebecca surrenders her will to Pasión and does not react against his beatings because it would be followed by ardent sex. As her subjectivity relies basically on this source of esteem, it is impossible for Rebecca to have a non-personalized and non-conformist attitude to escape the traps she sets for herself by endorsing the norms of a system that imprisons her.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that “patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally” (53). Repression, associated with other problems discussed previously, constitutes a significant aspect because it traumatically constructs Rebecca’s subjectivity. She chooses to wait for changes, especially those in her husband, Pasión, because she is unable to change herself. To make things worse, she finds it difficult to confront reality, and when she has to face it she ends up blaming her family for her problems, and, thus, becomes depressed. The narrative voice shows how difficult it is for Rebecca to deal with hardships:

Rebecca pulled away and curled like a child. This position was one she had adopted throughout her youth. If either of her parents had

resisted her adolescent whims, if she'd overheard Papito whispering news of Trujillo's dictatorial madness or had stumbled on Aurelia burying a stillborn child in the field behind their house, she had withdrawn to lie in bed. Only after her memory had dulled had she risen to sneak out of the house and pretend that what had caused her to retreat had never taken place (Pérez 212).

Andrea Nick claims that: "Mental illness is found predominantly among such groups as women, homosexuals, the poor" (91). She adds that "[i]n societies with rampant prejudice and discrimination, social inequalities, violence against women and children . . . members of oppressed groups will be more likely to become chronically or perpetually physically and/or psychiatrically disabled, with their minds overwhelmed with the negative realities in their lives" (Nicki 91). Nicki contends that anger is fundamental in depression, as it is the expression of hostility towards the self. She argues that to overcome depression it is necessary for the abused to feel anger towards the abuser (98). In Rebecca's case, this anger Nick refers to is directed towards herself, her children or her siblings, never towards Pasión. As her relationships with both husbands result in failures, her sense of self is too fragile, and that brings forth anger, and, consequently, depression. In cases of mental illnesses such as depression, Nick argues that it "is a condition fundamentally constituted in (the person's) mind, in negative thoughts about herself, about her worth and value, about her life and future, possibly about others and their lives, or about the world in general as hopelessly evil" (95). The negative thoughts Nick refers to make Rebecca see herself as a complete failure as a mother, a wife and as a US citizen. She, thus, feels so unworthy of everything that she thinks that she deserves the abuse Pasión submits her to.

Rebecca leaves home shortly after her last beating by Pasión because her parents threaten her by saying they will take the children away from her. The narrator evidences in the

following quote that Rebecca is aware of the similarities between her and Marina's condition when compared to her mother's depression after her arrival in the US:

Rebecca again flicked her tongue along the four stitches she had received. She wondered if her mother had paused long enough to reflect on the significance of having two daughters with self-inflicted wounds rushed to the same hospital within hours. Surely Aurelia, who had once starved herself to a point near death, could not deny that her daughters had taken after her (Pérez 203).

Such statements refer back to Fort's discussions on the transmission of traumatic events and also to Chodorow's, Bardwick and Douvan's theories on the mother-daughter relationship. Relying on Felman's statement about the presence of trauma in every woman's life, it is my belief that Rebecca suffers from social and family traumas caused by Trujillo's regime of terror, by patriarchal oppression, by poverty, and mostly by her husbands' physical violence and abuse. As the construction of the self is a continuous process, those traumas are aggravated by Rebecca's dislocation to the US, by her failure to become a citizen, and the subsequent displacement, discrimination and prejudice she suffers. Equally important is the fact that her grandmother's and her mother's excessive protection might have taken from her the opportunity to develop skills which might have helped her deal with disappointments, pain and other predicaments one always goes through in life. Furthermore, by witnessing her mother's state of depression and subsequent recoiling from life may have left everlasting traumatic memories; thus, making it difficult for her to fight against all these ordeals.



### 2.1.3 No-name Child: Marina

At the moment the reader first meets Marina, she is only twenty-four but sees herself as a spinster already. She is also in the first stages of a psychosis which escalates to madness throughout the novel. For many scholars nowadays, madness has been defined as a means of revealing rebellion and transgression and a way to escape from oppression; however, I believe it is necessary to peel off the many layers of the traumas – as stated by Brown – that Marina suffers in her process of her subjectivity construction, but also of fragmentation, in order to understand the reasons underlying her mental breakdown. Some critics disagree with the definition of madness proposed above, and one of them, Phyllis Chesler theorizes in *Women & Madness* that “[n]either genuinely mad women, or women who are hospitalized for conditioned behavior are powerful revolutionaries... [t]heir behavior is ‘mad’ because it represents a socially powerless individual’s attempt to unite body and feeling” (74). By acknowledging the complex representations of patriarchal discourse, racism, religion, and sexuality in Marina’s characterization, this analysis relies on Chesler’s theorization as a starting point to discuss this complex character.

As the process of subjectivity construction is continuous, it is relevant to investigate all the elements that trigger the traumatic experiences. In line with Chesler, Felman claims that

quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, ‘mental illness’ is a *request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration (21, author’s emphasis).

I believe that the socio-cultural conditioning that shapes the construction of Marina's subjectivities – the same that shapes Rebecca's – prevents her from developing skills with which she could affirm herself as an independent and free-willing subject. This lack of assertiveness is one of the elements to be accounted for her traumas and subsequent madness. To begin with, Marina is over-protected by Aurelia since her birth – more than Rebecca is. As Marina is unconscious in hospital after her third suicide attempt, Aurelia recalls the deep efforts she had made to keep the pregnancy, as she remembered her previous miscarriages: “I was so scared to lose you that I spent the summer with my legs propped up in bed so that you wouldn't slip out ahead of time” (141). Aurelia ponders about Marina's behavior as a child: “It scared me, how trusting you seemed to be. I worried that once you'd had a closer look at life you wouldn't stay” (Pérez 142). She decided, then, because of superstition, not to give the child the name she had chosen for her: “I kept your given name secret. I didn't want death to hear it or to remember that he had lost you twice and try again. So until you turned three and strong, I called you ugly names to ward him off – not ‘Marina,’ a name I prayed would keep you floating above harm” (Pérez 142). Thus, for the first three years of her life the child has as means of identification these “ugly names” Aurelia talks about. It may be said that this temporary identification with ugliness may have had some influence on the development of Marina's personality. Chodorow states that “[a]ccording to psychoanalytic theory, personality is a result of a boy's or girl's social-relational experiences from earliest infancy” (45). Accordingly, the experience that Marina undergoes in her early infancy may have been internalized and contributed for the low self-esteem she would develop as she grew older.

Chodorow contends that the infant's initial stages are of dependence on adults – usually the mother or someone else who takes care of her/him – and that a child experiences a sense of “oneness” with the mother. Later, the child differentiates herself from the mother, and starts developing an individuated sense of self (46). As for Marina, it seems that she has

some difficulty in dealing with issues of individuation since infant age. This fact adds to the possibility of her inheriting traumas from Aurelia – an issue discussed in my analysis of Rebecca as well – and that may account for the mental breakdown she goes through as an adult. In the passage below, Aurelia describes Marina's dependent behavior:

As you grew older, almost anything made you cry. Your brothers and sisters leaving you out of a game, your father scolding you for some mischief, a stranger throwing you an unkind glance, even a chained-up dog barking as you passed. You rarely played alone. You were so dependent on others for happiness that I thought someone had given you the evil eye to make you so (Pérez142).

The passage above shows that since early childhood Marina's subjectivity is shaped on other people's responses. Following these lines, and as I discuss in the first chapter, her being left behind in the Dominican Republic by her family plays a key role in Marina's process of subjectivity fragmentation and becomes traumatic as well, as she accuses her mother of being responsible for the event. As the following quote shows, she accuses her mother for all her ordeals but, interestingly, does not mention Papito: "So I'm supposed to feel sorry for you, the great self-sacrificing mother who left me in the Dominican Republic when you came here?" (Pérez 32). Regarding the separation of immigrant parents from their children, Suárez-Orozco states that "[i]f the separation was painful and the child was neglected or abused, this too will complicate the adjustment following migration. In any case, there is likely to be some fall-out following these years of separation prior to migration" (200). The maltreatment Marina is submitted to in the Dominican Republic and her dependence and difficulty in accepting separation are especially traumatic for the girl and add to her low self-esteem and to her inferiority complex as she grows older. In addition to these unfortunate aspects, Marina recalls an episode which seems to have caused her to think that her fate had been traced when

pigeons defecated on the air and their feces “land steaming on her head alone” (Pérez 99).

Her psychotic state of mind interprets this event as a confirmation that she is doomed to be a failure:

It had not mattered that she and her sisters were gathered in a tight circle reading a letter an admirer had slipped to Beatriz during the sermon. Nor had it mattered that their heads were pressed so close that the shit should have splattered onto all three. No. Like a sign from God Himself, the shit had dropped from the sky to land steaming on her head alone (Pérez 99).

According to Iliana’s memories of her sister, Marina was always submissive to her parents’ will: “she rarely caused her parents grief. Her chores were done when asked, and she willingly attended church on Saturday mornings and afternoons, even on Wednesday and Friday evenings when Papito allowed those of his children claiming exhaustion to remain at home” (Pérez 42). Her submission to patriarchy is more exacerbated than that of Rebecca, and her religiosity comes as a complicating element. Additionally, except for the short period in which she works at the law firm, there is no other textual evidence of Marina having social relations outside the private sphere of the home and the church. Alcantara argues that “the Dominican-Adventist culture states that a woman’s place is in the safe sphere of the home and that a woman must be dependent and submissive to her husband. Marriage and motherhood are women’s ultimate goal” (65). As the norms and values of patriarchy are also defined by religion, Marina is doubly entrapped in the role assigned to her because the values of the patriarchal family are reinforced by the church. Marina clings to the Adventist religion because it gives her a sense of belonging; however, it oppresses and prevents her from living a free life and fully experience her sexuality. In the following passage Marina argues with Iliana and shows she is aware of her condition,

“What the fuck is your problem?” Marina demanded. ‘You’re in school far away from here and can do anything you want! Look at me – I’m stuck at home and can’t even fart without asking for permission!’

‘You could’ve done the same thing.’

‘That’s not the point’ (Pérez 39).

Although she is aware of the norms that oppress her, Marina is unable to respond to oppression in the same way as Iliana does – by leaving home and entering the university.

In a more advanced stage of psychosis, the narrative voice shows that Marina’s perception of Iliana’s physical appearance and behavior unveils a judgment supported by a strong patriarchal view towards women:

Iliana’s body – with its meager breasts, long arms, and massive hands, thin legs and knobby knees – had appeared as lean as a prepubescent girl’s and more so like a boy’s. Her gait ... had been the exaggerated walk of a man imitating a woman. ... She was as self-seeking as a man and, like Vicente, had abandoned home when she’d been needed most. ... She was as indifferent as Tico, as confident about her opinions as Gabriel, as volatile as Caleb. Overall, she behaved more like her brothers and shared few of the personality traits of her sisters (Pérez 276-77).

Paradoxically, Marina desires to be as free as Iliana but she is unable to take control of her life because she associates Iliana’s freedom with masculine behavior. Marina is entrapped in patriarchal norms that ascribe behavioral roles, forms and meanings to the woman’s body that neither fit Iliana’s own body nor her behavior. This traditional view of gender roles and her misinterpretation of Iliana’s attitudes are some of the reasons that lead Marina to an extreme

state of rage and, in a psychotic episode, to rape Iliana in search for a penis because she believes her sister is a man.

As Marina is sexually oppressed by internalized traditional norms that impose marriage as the only way for a woman to exercise her sexuality, it may be argued that it is also one of the causes of her madness. Marina's need for a love that would fulfill her desires and the wish to belong is translated by delusions in which she sees herself inside a house she used to like and observes the following scene: "A loving husband approached her from behind. He wrapped his arms around her and sprinkled kisses on her cheek. Turning to face him, she returned his kisses with her own" (Pérez 85). Marina's hallucinations may be explanations for her traumas. In one of her psychotic episodes she sets fire in the kitchen to kill imaginary spiders:

What she saw as her eyes adjusted to the sudden glare chased a shiver up her spine. ...Several of the large, black spiders fell, but more teemed from under the backyard door to continue weaving a web that already extended toward the ceiling. ...she darted to the sink under which her father stored cans of lighter fluid. Careful to spill none on herself, she doused and flung a lit match at the wall. The flames caught the dark wood paneling as if it were kindling and traveled swiftly toward the ceiling (Pérez 13).

By setting fire to the spiders in this episode Marina strives to be purified from her desires, the disgusting feelings and fears that seem to threaten her. As to the fire, it has always been connected to purity since ancient times, when it was adored as a god by many peoples. Manfred Lurker, in *Dicionário de Simbologia*, states that "the greek 'pyr'= fire and the latin 'purus'= pure are etymologically cognates. Because of its purifying power, fire is a valued

means of penitence in which all the scum (impurity) of the sacrifice is eliminated” (274-75, my translation).

Marina’s mental state gets worse because she sees her prodigal sister Iliana enjoying the freedom she craves and is unable to fight for. In the next passage the narrator shows Marina’s feeling of suffocation, which seems related to Iliana’s presence in the house: “Ever since her sister’s return home, Marina had been finding their basement room increasingly claustrophobic. Each night and even with her eyes open, she felt the walls, with their damp, cold stones embedded deep in granite, heave as they nudged the room’s furniture toward its center” (Pérez 83). Thus, Iliana’s freedom becomes a reverse mirror for Marina in which she sees her own imprisonment and impotence.

It is relevant to point out that Marina’s hallucinations are often either connected to sex and its abuse or to power and powerlessness. Both issues unveil the sources of her traumas and consequent madness. When Iliana returns home Tico informs her of their sister’s mental state: “Marina said I snuck into her room in the middle of the night.... She claims I tried to rape her. She’s also been telling everyone Mom is a dyke and she and Dad abused her” (Pérez 37). Thus, Marina’s hallucinations disclose the extent to which sexual repression damages her subjectivity - a repression that would make her desperately seek for a husband because that is the only way she can fully experience her sexuality within the patriarchal norms within which she is trapped. Marina’s need for empowerment is translated in the kind of hallucinations she has: first in the spiders’ episode, then in the episode in which she talks to God and later when she becomes His advisor in earthly matters (Pérez 114). As her madness escalates, these are the means Marina finds for achieving power. In accordance to Chesler’s and Felman’s theories on madness, it is important to remember that Marina’s patriarchal-religious conditioning prevents her from developing skills that would enable her to fight oppression. Her identification with the ugly names her mother used to call her may have originated her

inferiority complex, and her abandonment in the Dominican Republic is a trauma that will add to that. Similarly to her sister Rebecca, Marina's subjectivity is shaped on a dependence on others' responses. The internalized racism I discuss in the next chapter added to the hardships she encounters in the US, all lead to Marina's fragmentation and madness.

#### **2.1.4 Ambivalence and Agency: Iliana**

From the very beginning of her life Iliana is connected to her grandmother as the girl is born at the moment of Bienvenida's death. In addition, family tradition claims the youngest daughter inherits spiritual powers from her mother. According to traditional beliefs, children are born equally paired, and Iliana should have been a boy to be paired with Tico. As this tradition is disrupted by her birth, since her childhood Iliana feels she is a deceptive unexpected event, an outcast that defies the order of things. As a lonely child – because Tico has a nephew his own age – she resorts to books as companions and observes her family, deciding from an early age that her life would be different from her sisters. Iliana also learns that the world has far more to offer than what her parents are able to give her (Pérez 43).

Poverty is a traumatizing condition for Iliana, especially after her family immigrates to the US. All the family members, including the children, have to work in the US. Through Marina's memories it is possible to see the difficult and dangerous conditions Iliana and her siblings go through when working in a clothes factory:

Marina had climbed onto a stool to lower what resembled a giant lid onto a metal table on which Beatriz, also perched atop a stool, laid out individual garments. When steam seeped from the table's edges, Marina had hoisted the lid back up so that Beatriz could remove the freshly pressed, hot clothes and pass them to Iliana, who then draped them on hangers (Pérez 96).



As a child, Iliana resents the fact that her parents cannot give her gifts in special occasions such as birthdays and Christmases. Her sense of misery and helplessness escalates as she compares her life with those of her Puerto Rican friends Lily and Pepe, whose parents could afford not only presents but also a comfortable life. Enraged by her situation – though she is only eight – Iliana destroys her friends' belief in Santa Claus, and is punished by Aurelia because of that. Later, she would destroy the doll she is given as a Christmas gift because it is not the one she wished for. Iliana also believes that her parents favor Tico and Beatriz by giving them the gifts they asked for, as this passage shows: “The one explanation she kept coming up with was that her parents valued her less for not being as pretty as Beatriz as well as for not being born a boy – an act which had defied their expectations and disrupted the pattern of two boys, two girls, two boys, and so forth” (Pérez 180-88).

Concerning one's self-devaluation, Suárez-Orozco stresses the significance of “powerful forces of social systems and culture in shaping self-other relationships” (213). She adds that “all human beings are dependent upon the reflection of themselves mirrored back to them by others....When the reflection is negative, it is extremely difficult to maintain an unblemished sense of self-worth for very long” (213). The referred birth pattern in the novel is instituted as the norm within the family, shaping its members' belief in regard to the sex of the new-born. For Iliana, the family's reaction to her so called “disruption” in that pattern, added to her supposed ugliness – as her brothers and sisters make her believe – and the poverty are negative experiences that bring forth a trauma that result in low self-worth and disconnection from the world around her. However, Iliana exhibits an emotion which I believe helps her escape from the same states of mental disorders seen in Rebecca's and Marina's: rage. Although she feels rejected, Iliana is enraged towards things she does not understand or does not accept, and most importantly, she does not direct this rage towards herself. Later she learns to channel this rage and deviate it by showing a good performance

at school and by anticipating difficult or embarrassing situations through which her siblings used to put her.

In the first chapter I introduce a discussion on the feeling of inadequacy that pervades Iliana's life because her body does not fit the patterns of femininity defined by traditional socio-cultural norms. An example of that is the fact that Iliana is mistaken for a drag queen by two men (Pérez 74). Troubled by this idea she asks her friend: "Ed, look at me," she instructed, leaning close. "Do I look like a drag queen to you?" (Pérez 74). Her friend Ed believes it means that she looks like the way drag queens would like to look, that is, extremely feminine (Pérez 75). Besides, he considers Iliana's walk "regal," her sisters see it as "whorish" (Pérez 5), and Marina believes it is the way a man walks when imitating a woman. Her brother Gabriel teases her because in his perception she looks like a man. As a result, Iliana is constantly shaken by this sexual ambivalence, a feature she struggles to resolve throughout the novel.

Regarding the female body, Alcantara states that, "women are imprisoned and the walls which restrict their freedom are mediated by cultural constructs, associations and images responsible for determining the role of the female subject in our society" (41). The cultural constructs that Alcantara points out determine that the female body must exhibit some features, such as curves and (big) breasts, a thin waist so that it can be identified as belonging to a woman'. As Iliana's body does not display these characteristics, she does not fit into this model. Her siblings, brothers and sisters alike, endorse this cultural construct and penalize Iliana because in their view she is a misfit, born from a deviance of what they consider to be the "right" norm.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, sees the notion of "being female" as unstable and unfixed and she claims that the construction of gender establishes itself through constant impersonation (2489). Butler argues that this impersonation, which occurs through

performative acts, reveals “a fluidity of identities that suggests openness to resignification and recontextualization” (2498). Thus, as Butler states, gender identity is perpetually open to new meanings. Regarding Iliana, the gender identity that categorizes her as a woman is questioned because of the multiple interpellations that label her. Additionally, Butler sees that this fluid identity destabilizes the power that operates in the configuration of the binary that conceptualizes the definition of gender and desire (2492-94). Although unconsciously, this destabilization takes place in Iliana. However, relying on Layton’s view on fragmented subjectivities, I see Iliana’s sexual fragmentation as painful and disturbing for her. The interpellations which attempt to categorize her seem irreconcilable, making her body a *locus* of struggle. At home, she wears clothes which please her family: “She had carefully selected these garments – keeping in mind that she needed to please her parents as well as her sisters who habitually accused her of dressing like a man” (Pérez 260). At the university she experiences the mundane things she is forbidden at home: wearing knee-length skirts, going to bars and the movies, wearing earrings; all that would be considered indecent by the Adventist religion (Pérez 8). Additionally, she is puzzled for her having “a hard time getting dates” (Pérez 75). This ambivalent gender identity leads at first to Iliana’s subjectivity fragmentation and that, added to the trauma discussed above, bring forth suffering and pain. It is true that her fluidity destabilizes the traditional patterns of compulsory heterosexuality – as defined by Butler - and that is one of the reasons why Marina rapes her. Nevertheless, for the analysis of Iliana’s traumas it is crucial to take into consideration the many axes which make up her subjectivity as well as Layton’s theory on the effects of the self fragmentation because Iliana’s so-called disruption of the norms practiced within the family and her sexual ambivalence result in suffering for her.

Iliana’s agency manifests itself in her desire to get a higher education, and also in that she does not see marriage as a solution for her, as her sisters do. Instead, she desires to have

someone, and wishes this person could be Ed – her gay friend – possibly because Ed does not embody the repression she experiences at home. After she goes to university, her view of the world is more expanded compared to that of her sisters, allowing her to see the differences between her home – and the rules imposed in that space – and the external world. Although Iliana's attempts to voice her anger toward her family and tradition is silenced by Papito's authority and violence, her resiliency – discussed in the previous chapter – her anger, and her distance from her family enable her to realize that in order to preserve her mental stability after her rape she must leave home.

Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina and Iliana are traumatized by the various issues I discuss above. The social contexts in which they are inserted are significant in triggering and adding to their traumas. These traumas are caused initially by a political situation in their native country, namely Trujillo's reign of terror. In a narrow scope, they are also borne in the family sphere, as, for instance, through bereavement; the dependence that traditional values endorsed by patriarchy impose on women; the difficulty to deal with the hardships; parental overprotection; sexual repression; the misinterpretation of gender roles and the fragmentation that derive from it; poverty; violence against women and the silencing of their voices. For Rebecca and Marina these traumas lead to mental disorders such as depression, inferiority complex and madness. For Aurelia and Iliana, although they go through traumatic events, their resiliency, anger (in Iliana's case ) and the spiritual roots to which they are connected enable them to acknowledge their traumas and search for ways that will allow them to deal with their pain and suffering.

## 2.2 Nation and People Adrift: *Dreaming in Cuban*

A crucial event in Cuba was the ascent of Fidel Castro to the highest post of the nation with the establishment of the communist ideology, and the settlement of a dictatorship that lasts until today. Similarly to what happened in the Dominican Republic, this event marked, divided, and traumatized the history of the nation. Bridget Kevane, in *Latino Literature in America*, states that “although the novel can be read as a microcosm for the contemporary political history of Cuba, namely the Castro dictatorship, (Garcia’s) goal was to closely examine how women adapted to the disruption of their families after the revolution” (85). In this section I analyze the traumas the characters Celia, Felicia, Lourdes and Pilar go through, and the role of the socio-cultural contexts in these traumas.

Nadia I. Johnson, in a study about *Dreaming in Cuban*, claims that “Cuba is a nation that has been constructed around extreme ideologies. Pre-revolutionary Cuba is marked by the control of the wealth by a small Spanish upper-class, where the post-revolutionary Cuba is marked by the obliteration of the upper class and the progression of the African and Indigenous population” (78). As I show in my first chapter, this divide is explored in the novel through the portrayal of Celia, who supports the revolution, and Lourdes, who is anti-Castro. Johnson adds that “[t]he women of the novel have been dispersed and scattered in their native land and across oceans by sexual trauma, opposing national allegiances, and racial attitudes that are a direct result of Fidel Castro’s revolution. The del Pino women are clearly suffering under this complex political system of patriarchal domination created in the aftermath of Castro’s triumph” (62). The image of the father embodied by Castro plays a key role in the process of the subjectivity construction and fragmentation for the characters analyzed here, adding to other traumas they go through. In the novel, the characters constantly refer to “El Líder,” a name commonly used to address the Cuban leader.

### 2.2.1 Passion and Longing: Celia

In *Dreaming in Cuban* as well, the past is also fundamental to help understand the intricacies that ground the process of subjectivity construction of the women characters. They are marked by isolation, loneliness and patriarchal oppression. The first character I analyze is Celia del Pino. The novel opens with Celia in her seaside house in Santa Teresa del Mar, guarding the coast from a possible American attack on Cuba, similar to the historical one that occurred at the Bay of Pigs. Celia is old and lives alone. In her porch she fantasizes about being seduced by ‘El Líder’: “She would be feted at the palace, serenaded by a brass orchestra, seduced by El Líder himself on a red velvet divan” (Garcia 3). This fantasy corroborates the myth of seducer created around Castro’s image in his young age.

In an article entitled “Castro’s Women” Andrew St. George traces back El Líder’s involvement with women, his attitude towards them, and the many myths created about him. Similarly to Trujillo, Castro is known for the charisma which makes him famous among women. St. George claims that Castro’s sexual appetite is only balanced by his obsession with the good results of the revolution. He adds that stories abound about his raping of virgins, which he neither worried about commenting nor denying. A notorious one is the Lorenz’s case - his alleged rape of an 18-year-old American girl at the Hilton in Havana – and her forceful abortion afterwards (8-12, 75). This story refers back to the image of rapes of women associated with the rapes of nations in colonial times. Ania Loomba affirms that “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolize the conquered lands. This metaphoric use of the female body varies in accordance with the exigencies and histories of particular colonial situations” (129). Thus, from the records of history, either in colonial times or in modern ones, women’s bodies are persistently associated with land subjugation and sexual gratification for the conqueror. They seem to be repeated in

Castro's victory over Batista and his supporter, the US. The episode mentioned above seems to evoke the same mechanics as the rumor of Castro's rape of the American woman is a way of reinforcing his image of a leader and it is seen as a reference to his power over the US.

Carlos Moore, in *Castro, the Blacks and Africa*, shows the worshipping of the revolutionary leader in the narrative of a married woman: "*I've always been faithful. But if Fidel asked me to go to bed with him, I must admit to you, I wouldn't hesitate....Fidel, Fidel! Que hombre! Que hombre!*" (45, author's emphasis). Thus, between myth and reality, Castro's aura of seducer hovered over women's imaginary, especially in the first years of the revolution. More recently, reinforcing this image, in the blog post "New York Post: Fidel Castro Bedded 35,000 Women," Saikat Basu details Castro's apparently extraordinary sexual performances: "He slept with at least two women a day for more than four decades, one for lunch and one for supper. Sometimes he even ordered one for breakfast" (Digital Journal). For the patriarch-sexual predator it seems that women are items to be consumed voraciously. Be it true or not, the fact is that his personal charisma was magnified because of the changes he made in Cuba's society, especially those that brought a better life for the lower classes and the dispossessed. In *The Economist* article "Brother Fidel and the Women of Cuba," the author affirms that "women in Cuba are not ... exactly stay-home types. Despite the country's lingering machismo, Mr. Castro's regime has raised them to near-equality with men". He states that compared to the situation in the 1940s, women are ahead of men in getting higher education and they make up 65% of Cuba's high qualified workers. Additionally, the revolution granted them sexual freedom, legal right to abortion, and no prejudice in case of divorce.

Hence, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Celia embodies the image of those women who fantasized and desired the charismatic, highly sexualized figure of Castro. Celia replaces Jorge's picture for Castro's at her bedside, and at the start of the revolution she gives up her

devotion to Gustavo, beginning a fierce worshipping of Castro. Although she is aware of the power the traditional norms have over her, she surrenders to Castro's revolution with the same passion she would dedicate to a lover and this attitude has effects on her relationship with her family. Myra Mendible, in "Absent Fathers and Lost Lovers," states that the "two mystified objects of desire" (the Spaniard and El Líder) translate "Celia's search for fulfillment and self-validation" (12-13). This search for her subjectivity is rooted in her traumatic abandonment by her mother, and in the other predicaments she goes through, events that would haunt Celia and become traumas which would pervade her life.

In the essay "From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina Garcia," Katherine B. Payant provides an explanation for Celia's fragmentation: her "psychological problems predate her abandonment by Gustavo and are rooted in her childhood." As Celia's parents get divorced, they distribute their children among relatives, and she is sent to Tía Alicia, in Havana. Celia is four years old at the time, and this trauma will have painful consequences for her and her daughters, as she observes: "Of my mother I remember next to nothing, only hard eyes that seemed to float like relics in her forehead, ... When she put me on the day-break train to Havana, I called to her from the window but she didn't turn around... On the way to Havana, I forgot her" (Garcia 100). As an adult, Celia is influenced by her aunt's romanticism and is easily attracted to Gustavo, the married Spaniard who later abandons her. For Payant, Gustavo refers back to "the many outsiders, colonialists such as the Spanish and business people such as the North Americans, who have exploited the beauty and riches of Cuba and then left". Gustavo abandons Celia without even saying good-bye and she is devastated. As a result, she gets depressed and is taken "to her bed by early summer and stayed there for the next eight months. That she was shrinking there was no doubt" (Garcia 36). Gustavo's abandonment is traumatic and will add to the trauma of her mother's earlier desertion of her, which would influence the way Celia would later deal with her children. Still



in love with Gustavo, Celia marries Jorge, who is a salesman for an American company. In this period she starts writing letters to her lover, which are never sent, and which she bequeaths to her granddaughter Pilar much later in the narrative. In these letters she records the family history and the important events in Cuba's history. However, her life with Jorge adds to her sufferings and depression because Jorge's mother and sister – Berta and Ofelia – make a hell out of her life. Both women enforce the subjugating role of women by idolizing Jorge and torturing Celia.

As she gets pregnant, Jorge stays away longer, leaving her in the hands of his mother and sister. Celia records her suffering in one of her letters to Gustavo: "They poison my food and milk but still I swell. The baby lives on venom" (Garcia 50). Celia still holds a very romantic view of her relationship with the Spaniard and hopes to leave for Spain to search for him if she has a son, although she decides to stay in case she has a daughter. This son embodies a possibility of escaping the patriarchal norms that suffocate her. Johnson states that "[u]nderstanding the hierarchy of gender in Cuba, Celia knows that a son can thrive and be successful, even without his mother" (Garcia 67). As Lourdes is born, Celia suffers a mental breakdown – possibly a post-partum depression – and rejects the child. She is unable to keep the promise of "not abandon(ing) a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival" (Garcia 42). Although she remains in Cuba, she shows no affection towards her daughter. Referring back to Chodorow's theory about the development of women's personality, it is my belief that Celia's abandonment of Lourdes has a direct relation to her own abandonment by her mother. Chodorow contends that "[t]he nature and quality of the social relationships that the child experiences are appropriated, internalized, and organized by her/him and comes to constitute her/his personality" (45). Celia's coldness towards Lourdes is a result of the experiences she goes through and her own abandonment. Consequently, her process of subjectivity

fragmentation results from the traumatic separation from her mother, added to the problems she undergoes.

As Celia gets older, the memories of this trauma haunt her again, adding to her already fragmented self. Celia internalizes the abandonment she suffers and reenacts it with her own child. Besides, the suffering she goes through in Berta's hands adds to her already fragmented subjectivity, obliterating the possibility of affection and care she might have felt for Lourdes. Additionally, the realization that Lourdes's birth would keep her imprisoned under the suffocating rules of a patriarchal system also brings forth Celia's mental breakdown. Her stay at the asylum to which Jorge sends her and the electric shock therapy she receives are the final blow to her broken self.

Celia suffers other kinds of abandonment and separation. First, Lourdes leaves Cuba, taking Pilar with her. For Celia, this separation is traumatic as well because she is closely connected to her granddaughter, and she hopes that Pilar will come back to Cuba one day. The connection remains strong despite the distance and is kept through the telepathic conversations between the two, but eventually they come to an end. Jorge leaves for the US to treat a stomach cancer, and dies there. Throughout the years Celia learns to love Jorge –not with the passion she feels for Gustavo – and his death makes her acknowledge her loneliness and sense of separation from the world: “Celia cannot decide which is worse, separation or death. Separation is familiar, too familiar, but Celia is uncertain she can reconcile it with permanence” (Garcia 6). Jorge's death increases Celia's feeling of isolation. Still, Celia is to face another devastating event when Javier, her youngest child, returns from Czechoslovakia with a broken heart, and eventually disappears. She is especially connected to him because he is the only member of the family who supports Castro as she does. I believe that Celia, to a lesser degree, repeats in her worshipping of the son, the same attitude her mother-in-law has in relation to Jorge. As the narrator observes: “Celia falls on her son like a lover, kissing his

face and his eyes and his broken-knuckled hands” (Garcia 156). Rocio G. Davis affirms, in “Back to the Future: Mothers, Languages, and Homes in Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*,” that this relationship is rooted in Spanish and Cuban culture in that sons are privileged because they are seen as the future of the family and the country. Finally, Felicia’s death seems to lead Celia to a near-madness state, as the narrative voice states: “Celia overturned the tureen with the sacred stones and crushed Felicia’s seashells under the heels of her leather pumps. Suddenly, she removed her shoes and began stamping on the shells in her bare feet, slowly at first, then faster and faster in a mad flamenco, her arms thrown up in the air” (Garcia 190). Only with Felicia’s death can Celia realize the extension of her children’s problems and her inability to deal with them. The understanding of this situation breaks her down again.

In the end, Celia is aware that her devotion to the revolution blinded her to her family’s troubles, especially Felicia’s, whom she leaves in the middle of a crisis to work in the sugar plantations. However, this awareness does not result in changes in her relationship with Lourdes. Although Celia meets Lourdes one last time, both remain irreconcilable, their languages forever alien to each other. For Celia, the only escape she envisions from her suffering is suicide and she drowns herself in the sea. It could be argued that in a way Celia is a victim of abandonment, excessive romanticism and patriarchal rules which traumatize her. These traumas are aggravated by Jorge’s punishment of her – through his mother –, her stay at the asylum, his taking Lourdes away from her, Felicia’s death and Javier’s disappearance. Thus, the many episodes of abandonment, the patriarchal oppression, and the suffering Celia goes through all contribute to her traumas and her subsequent mental breakdown that results in her suicide.

### 2.2.2 Embodying Infelicity: Felicia

From the beginning of her story, and through the etymology of her name, Felicia gives the reader a clue of her everlasting suffering and unfortunate fate. Celia meets a woman she admires named Felicia during her stay at the asylum: “She killed her husband. Doused him with gasoline. Lit a match. She is unrepentant. We’re planning to escape” (Garcia 51). Celia names her second daughter after her insane friend – who also dies in a fire – and that, she believes later, has consequences in the future. Since her childhood Felicia is an outcast inside her home, although Celia tries to make up for her rejection of Lourdes by giving her love to Felicia. Mary S. Vasquez, in “Cuba as Text and Context in Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*,” claims that to Felicia, “Celia bequeaths her poetry, her love of language, her sensuality, her ever hovering madness.” Felicia’s delusions are rooted in language, as the narrative voice shows in this passage: “She hears them (people) talking but cannot understand what they say.... Felicia’s mind floods with thoughts, thoughts from the past, from the future, other people’s thoughts. Things come back as symbols, bits of conversation” (Garcia 75-76). She also speaks with her son Ivanito in a different language: “‘Let’s speak in green,’ his mother says, and they talk about everything that makes them feel green. They do the same with blues and yellows” (Garcia 84). Additionally, since childhood Felicia cannot speak the language that Jorge and Lourdes share, although she tries to fit in: “He was always away on business. This time, he had promised to bring his wife a Jamaican maid...Felicia’s father didn’t return with a maid but he brought back a signed baseball for her sister, Lourdes, that made her jump in place with excitement. Felicia didn’t recognize the name” (Garcia 11). Jorge and Lourdes develop a language none of the family members can understand, and Jorge displays a deep admiration for everything from the United States, a trait that Lourdes would inherit. The estranged language in the novel is a metaphor for distance and separation between

the characters, and Felicia remains adrift among them. As to this difficulty in communication between the characters in the novel, April A. Shemak states that “the female characters struggle to find forms of articulation that enable attachments with their families and communities” (2). For Felicia all attempts to connect to her family result in failure, mainly because Jorge is only devoted to Lourdes, thus paying no attention to Felicia’s problems. Whereas Celia seems to accept motherhood with Felicia’s birth, she is too immersed in her passion for Gustavo, and later, in her devotion to the revolution to realize the physical and mental fragmentation Felicia starts going through.

Felicia’s delusions since childhood are also connected with sounds - “suddenly she can hear things very vividly” (Garcia 75) - colors, the sun, and thoughts as well. She dances Beny Moré songs tirelessly because it brings some relief from her delusions. As a child she becomes fascinated with Saint Sebastian – mainly because of his double death – and chooses him to be the saint of her confirmation, which never happens (Garcia 77). As an adult, she believes she hears the saint speak about his disappointment with her. Although Felicia presents a dysfunctional behavior since an early age, she attempts to have some agency in her life by looking for a job. However, the one she finds is to work as an escort for rich businessmen, a job that worries Celia and about which she talk to Gustavo in a letter:

I’m very worried about Felicia. She’s left high school and says she wants to work. She takes the bus to Havana every afternoon and doesn’t come back until late at night. She tells me she’s looking for a job. But there’s only one in the city for fifteen-year-old girls like her. ... I’ve heard many stories of young girls destroyed by what passes as tourism on this country. Cuba has become the joke of the Caribbean, a place where everything and everyone is for sale (Garcia 164).

Shemak claims that “as a fifteen-year old, she embodies an eroticized physical and economic link between pre-revolutionary Cuba and the United States.” In the pre-revolution period Cuba was famous as a place for sex tourism for the US businessmen. Thus, Felicia has no options regarding work, as in traditional societies women are expected to marry and have children. Her choices lie in being either a shop assistant or a prostitute. Although she is young, needy, and mentally unstable, Felicia refuses to prostitute herself. However, her lack of connection to the world, her loneliness and her abandonment by Jorge leads her to a ruinous relationship with her first husband.

Felicia strongly desires a connection with the world and to be loved – it seems that both are synonyms in the character’s mind – and the first possibility of achieving this connection comes through Hugo Villaverde, a merchant sailor with whom she falls in love. In the passage below, her docile submission to him unveils the inability to deal with her loneliness and separation from her family and social relations:

The day she met him, he sat alone in the back booth of El Ternero Dorado restaurant staring at her. She approached him, nervously wiping the backs of her hands on her canvas apron

“We have a sea bass special today,” she stammered. “Grilled, nice and fresh.”

“Have you eaten?” he asked, placing a heavy hand on her wrist. That was all it took.

Felicia removed her apron as if commanded by Saint Sebastian himself and followed Hugo Villaverde out the door (Garcia 78).

Later, soon after their wedding, Felicia would be rejected and beaten by Hugo because she is pregnant, as we see from this passage: “‘If you want, I can tie you up the way you like,’ she

offered. Hugo pressed his fist under Felicia's chin until he choked off her breath, until she could see the walls of the living room behind her. 'If you come near me, I'll kill you. Do you understand?'" (Garcia 81). For Hugo, Felicia does not mean anything. She simply serves his sexual urges; therefore, as she gets pregnant, his interest disappears.

In her second pregnancy Hugo infects her with syphilis and that adds to Felicia's subjectivity fragmentation. Her mental condition worsens and she tries to kill Hugo by setting fire on him, as the narrator tells:

That afternoon, as she was frying plantains in a heavy skillet, the nausea suddenly stopped. It gave her a clarity she could not ignore. Felicia dropped a rag into the skillet and watched it go limp with oil... She lit a match and approached her husband, asleep on the couch.... Felicia carefully brought the blue flame to the tip of the rag...Hugo awoke and saw his wife standing over him like a goddess with a fiery ball in her hand. "You will never return here," Felicia said and released the flames onto his face (Garcia 82).

In her attempt to be loved, Felicia encounters oppression, violence, denigration, and disease. As a result, she gets trapped into marriage and motherhood. She is also aware that motherhood would keep her more constrained and, consequently, more subordinate to Hugo's violence and abuse. Accordingly, Felicia rejects her twin daughters, Luz and Milagro. Her own abandonment by her father, her unstable mental condition, the sufferings she goes through with Hugo, and the syphilis, all lead to Felicia's abandonment of her daughters and her subsequent madness.

Felicia gets married a second time, to Ernesto, whom she meets and marries in four days, and who dies in a fire at his workplace. The facts that she tries to kill Hugo with fire, and that later she accomplishes it with her third husband Otto Cruz, who is electrocuted in the

wires of a roller coaster (Garcia 185), symbolize her attempt to free herself from oppressive husbands that, nevertheless, she herself chooses. To achieve her freedom she uses fire, in the same way as Marina attempted to set herself free from sexual desire and disgust, by burning the spiders in her hallucination. Through fire, both women search for purification and escape from their present situation. Additionally, the oppression she goes through in her marriage to Hugo adds to the estrangement with Jorge because he is against their union, possibly because Hugo is black. Jorge's indifference towards Felicia continues after his death because he comes back to see Celia and keeps his connection with Lourdes. As for Felicia, he only mentions her when he talks to Lourdes for the last time, trying to convince her to go back to Cuba, as we see in this passage: “‘There's something else I must tell you,’ Jorge del Pino says. ‘Your sister has died. She was sad when she died. She spoke your name and mine’” (Garcia 196). Concerning this indifference, Felicia complains: “‘He didn't even say good-bye.’ The last time Felicia saw her father, he had smashed a chair over her ex-husband Hugo's back. ‘If you leave with that sonofabitch, don't ever come back!’ her father had shouted as they fled” (Garcia 12). For Jorge it seems as if Felicia had ceased to exist.

Although Celia affirms to love Felicia, her attitude as a mother is rather cold, so later their relationship would be affected by Felicia's refusal to fully become a communist, as the narrator shows in this passage: “the only thing Felicia ever did for the revolution was pull a few dandelions during the weed-eradication campaign in 1962, and then only reluctantly. Her lack of commitment is a source of great rancor between them” (Garcia 107). It seems to me that Felicia, despite her madness, can view patriarchal and political oppression clearer than Celia can. As El Líder is the embodiment of sexual power, his image obviously appeals to women's imaginary in a way that obliterates their view of political oppression. As an illustration, Felicia suspects that her mother's devotion to El Líder is more than just political, for she “can't help feeling that there is something unnatural in her mother's attraction to him,



something sexual. She has heard of women offering themselves to El Líder, drawn by his power, by his unfathomable eyes, and it is said he has fathered many children on the island” (Garcia 110). Similarly, Felicia is influenced by El Líder’s sex appeal. After she tries to kill herself and her son Ivanito, she is sent to a military training in the jungle as a kind of treatment and as way to to become a “real socialist”. Although she despises the regime’s oppression and hypocrisy, she fantasizes about having sex with the dictator (Garcia 110-11). Concerning the links between mother and daughter, Chodorow argues that “identification with (the) mother is not positional – the narrow learning of particular role behaviors – but rather a personal identification with (the) mother’s general traits of character and values” (51). Felicia and Celia share many similarities, despite the opposite opinions regarding the regime. Vasquez claims that “a web of affinities and replications, primarily unconscious, both ultimately recognized and forever unacknowledged or unknown, links the characters of *Dreaming in Cuban* one to another.” I believe that these similarities between Celia and her daughters, especially Felicia, may be explained by Forter’s theory on the transmission of traumatic memories and behaviors. Chodorow’s arguments about the definition of woman’s personality are also relevant for a better understanding of Felicia’s problems. She inherits the insanity of her namesake and in her relationship with Luz and Milagro she replicates Celia’s coldness towards her. She also worships Ivanito in the same way as Celia does with Javier. Like Rebecca, she attempts to fulfill the void of her abandonment through sex and she tries to purify herself from oppression, violence and disease by burning two of her husbands, repeating the acts of the insane Felicia after whom she is named.

Marina J. V. F. Espírito Santo states that Felicia lacks the “qualities of strength and power” present in Celia, Lourdes and Pilar (50), although she is a daughter of Changó, the god of power in Santería. I would argue that Felicia’s “lack of will” is the result of a legacy that disempowers and makes her deadly sick, namely, the abandonment that traumatizes her,

the need to define herself through love, the subsequent mental disorder, the syphilis she gets from her husband, and most importantly, the patriarchal and political oppression she tries to disengage herself from. Felicia is a misfit, both inside her family and in the sociopolitical context. Her affiliation to Santeria is the most consistent attempt to define her subjectivity because “[f]or her, they (the ceremonies) were a kind of poetry that connected her to larger worlds, worlds alive and infinite” (Garcia 186). However, her health – mental and physical – and beauty are destroyed in such a way that even her embracing of Santeria cannot make her recover, although it brings her some relief. After she becomes a santera, all her diseases – mental, social, physical – take control of her: “Her eyes dried out like an old woman’s and her fingers curled like claws until she could hardly pick up her spoon. Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow’s, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line in her face” (Garcia 189). That she only recovers her beauty after her death symbolizes her misplacement and inadequacy inside such an oppressive, sickening and traumatic context. As she cannot fully exercise her freedom, her sexual desire, her nonracist view of the world in life and, after all, as she cannot fit in, death becomes the only solution for her as well.

### **2.2.3 Past and Present Voids: Lourdes**

As I anticipate in the first chapter and in my analysis of Celia, Lourdes is abandoned as a consequence of Celia’s mental breakdown, as it is narrated in this passage: “Celia talked about how the baby had no shadow, how the earth in its hunger had consumed it. She held their child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, ‘I will not remember her name’” (Garcia 43). The memory of this rejection haunts Lourdes to her adulthood, and it can be accounted for the social trauma of abandonment, although it occurs in the realm of a psychological loss.

Lourdes claims to remember everything about this abandonment. As a result, she develops strong bonds with her father, who spoils her. Lourdes's lack of interaction with her mother is fundamental for her psychological dysfunctions. Concerning the consequences of difficult interactions between the primary caretaker and the infant, Layton argues that

the mechanism central to fragmentation is splitting, an early defense that operates to keep separate good and bad object representations. If the environment is harsh, particularly with regard to interactions around dependence and independence, the child continues splitting in order to preserve enough of a sense of a good object to keep developing. In this situation, the child's inner and outer world fragment, become black and white in all arenas (108).

For Lourdes, abandonment brings forth traumatic consequences, and as a result, she sees Celia and all that is related to her as inappropriate and all that is related to Jorge as irreprehensible.

As an adult, Lourdes keeps this black and white view, admitting no dreamers in her world, especially Celia and Pilar. Later, Celia makes some unsuccessful attempts at showing her love for Lourdes. As Celia observes: "That girl is a stranger to me. When I approach her, she turns numb, as if she wanted to be dead in my presence. I see how different Lourdes is with her father, so alive and gay, and it hurts me, but I don't know what to do. She still punishes me for the early years" (Garcia 163). ). Lourdes has the first impressions of the world from Jorge, and she reenacts many of his behaviors, namely, the arrogance, the indifference to others' problems, the admiration of US values, and the hatred of Communism. It is relevant to note, however, that Lourdes and Celia are portrayed as sharing some traits, for instance, their radicalism over politics and their enforcement of law and order. Lourdes works as an auxiliary policewoman in Brooklyn and Celia as a coast guard and community judge in

Cuba. Both women also share the habit of wearing wet clothes to damp their bodies. In some ways, both women mirror each other although they choose opposite paths in their lives.

Lourdes's traumas – her abandonment, the loss of her baby, the rape she suffers, and the escape from Cuba – all contribute for her dysfunctional behavior. However, her selfish attachment to Jorge does not empower her to deal with her traumas. She oppresses her employees; her relationship with Rufino, her husband, is complicated as he has no voice, and she reproduces patriarchal norms that she passes on to Pilar, oppressing and trying to control her. Because of that, Pilar distances herself from her mother, as she states: “I feel much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom, even though I haven't seen my grandmother in seventeen years” (Garcia 176). Contrary to Celia's need to flee oppression, Lourdes becomes its enforcer. Mother and daughter again speak an estranged language, and the disconnection between them is transmitted here as well, as Lourdes reenacts with Pilar the separation she experiences with Celia. Through Pilar's narrative we come to know that Rufino ends up by having an affair with another woman, although Lourdes is unaware of that, and Pilar leaves home for the university, mainly to escape Lourdes's oppression and to find a path for her to understand her own subjectivity. In different ways, father and daughter search for means of escaping Lourdes's control. Lourdes also feels there is a void in her life; however, she never acknowledges it is related to Cuba and her past there.

After his death, Jorge confesses to Lourdes that he was the cause of Celia's mental breakdown after Lourdes's birth because he purposefully let his mother torture his wife. He also meant to separate Lourdes from her, as he states: “I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. When I returned, it was done” (Garcia 195). Because Jorge is jealous of Celia's love for the Spaniard, he destroys the possibility of love between mother and daughter, causing more traumas for Celia and also for Lourdes. At a point Jorge tells Lourdes that their conversations will come to an end (Garcia 193) and that Celia loves her. He

is worried about Lourdes's inability to deal with Pilar and with her traumas caused by her abandonment, her rape and her loneliness. He urges her to go back to Cuba, but she starts experiencing flashbacks of her rape, which she had repressed. She tells him: "You don't understand," Lourdes cries and searches the breeze above her. She smells the brilliantined hair, feels the scraping blade, the web of scars it left on her stomach" (Garcia 196).

Concerning the post traumatic symptoms, Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart claim that "traumatized people (have) visual and motoric reliving experiences, nightmares, flashbacks, and reenactments seem to be preceded by physiological arousal" (174). Both scholars add that, "memories are reactivated when a person is exposed to a situation, or is in a somatic state, reminiscent of the one when the original memory was stored" (174). The possibility of a return to Cuba brings back to Lourdes the terrible memories of the rape she suffered there. She has some difficulty in breathing, a physiological symptom, as Van der Kolk and Van der Hart describe. Besides, Lourdes is abashed by the fact that her father knows about her rape and she asks him: "'Who told you?' Lourdes collapses on the walkway, her lungs swelling with air. 'Nobody. I just knew'" (Garcia 196). Payant affirms that "Lourdes has not acknowledged the trauma of her rape and departure". I believe it is true, but her last conversation with Jorge is decisive in that it brings the rape to the sphere of reality because so far Lourdes had not told anyone about that. In fact she has entirely blocked her memory and denies it even to herself. Eventually, she agrees to return to Cuba with Pilar.

The political issues and the personal problems are fused in Lourdes's mind (Espírito Santo 32). For that reason, she sees Cuba's embracing of communism as a betrayal. This perception is complicated because Celia fervently supports the new regime. Thus, for Lourdes, she is twice betrayed: by her mother and also by the motherland. In addition, the loss of her former life style adds to Lourdes's process of fragmentation, although she seems fully assimilated in the US. Mujcinovic affirms that Lourdes "embraces exile as a space

where she can recuperate her obliterated self.” Lourdes does embrace exile, but she is not able to reconcile with her abandonment and what she sees as the betrayal of Cuba, nor is she able to overcome the traumatic memories of the rape.

Lourdes’s traumas are complicated by Jorge’s death and she has again physiological symptoms that unveil her difficulty in dealing with the painful reality. The narrator describes how “Lourdes has lost eighty-two pounds. She is drinking liquid protein now, a bluish fluid that comes in tubes like astronaut food” (Garcia 170). Additionally, contrary to her previous craving for sex, Lourdes now avoids it: “She hasn’t had relations with Rufino since her father died. It’s as if another woman had possessed her in those days, a whore, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband’s nauseating clots of yellowish milk” (Garcia 169). She cannot conciliate eating and having sex with her husband with her father’s death. They are both forms of pleasure and fulfillment and for her they might appear as a betrayal to Jorge. This rejection of pleasures is also a way of taking control of her body; however, she loses it at the moment Pilar mentions she might move back to Cuba, as this quote shows:

Lourdes stares hard at her daughter. She wants to say that nobody but a degenerate would want to move back to that island-prison....Instead, Lourdes turns her attention to a sliver of turkey on her plate. She tastes a small chunk. It’s juicy and salty and goes straight to her veins. She decides to have another piece. In a moment her mouth is moving feverishly, like a terrible furnace. ...Lourdes eats, eats, eats, like a Hindu goodness with eight arms, ... as if famine were imminent (Garcia 173-74).

Thus, Lourdes’s trauma resurfaces as there is a possibility of proximity with Cuba. Although her traumas speak through her body, she seems unable to realize their consequences for herself.

Lourdes's return to Cuba with Pilar seems to signal a step towards acknowledging and understanding her traumas. First, she tends for Celia affectionately, as her mother is under a serious depression after Felicia's death. As Pilar observes, "Mom untangles Abuela's hair with a wide-toothed comb. 'You could have died of pneumonia!' she insists" (Garcia 218). However, she is disgusted to find El Líder's picture over Jorge's on Celia's night table, and she throws it in the ocean. Lourdes visits her former farm – the place where she was raped and lost her baby afterwards – and for the first time she thinks about these events, as the narrator describes her feelings : "What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby's death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her" (Garcia 227). Lourdes has the chance to meet El Líder near the Peruvian embassy where thousands of Cubans are asking for exile. Although she desires to kill him, she only manages to call him "'Asesino!'" – murderer – (237, author's emphasis). Later, without her mother's knowledge she arranges for her nephew Ivanito to flee from Cuba. Lourdes's revenge over El Líder is partially accomplished in this act, which is performed in conjunction with Pilar, who helps her. To the end, Lourdes's and Celia's personal and political differences remain unresolved. After their last argument, Lourdes ponders: "She knows that she cannot keep her promise to her father, to tell her mother that he was sorry, sorry for sending her away, sorry for her silent hands. The words refuse to form in her mouth. Instead, like a brutal punishment, Lourdes feels the grip of her mother's hand on her bare infant leg, hears her mother's words before she left for the asylum: 'I will not remember her name'" (Garcia 238). Accordingly, Lourdes's trauma of abandonment haunts her to the end. As for her relationship with Pilar, helping Ivanito opens a possibility of dialogue and bonding. Davis claims that texts such as *Dreaming in Cuban* "highlight questions of identification with and differentiation from the mother, emphasizing a need for

understanding and bonding between mothers and daughters as a fundamental step toward self-awareness and mastery of the culture.” As for Lourdes, the identification with her mother is not possible because of her memory of Celia’s abandonment and for the fact that her subjectivity remains fragmented and traumatized. The pre-revolution Cuba is still inscribed in Lourdes’s subjectivity, but the new one remains unaccepted. Whereas Lourdes seems to take a step to overcome the traumas associated with her baby’s death and her rape, she cannot deal with Cuba’s communism.

#### **2.4. 4 Bridging over past and present: Pilar Puente**

Pilar’s experience of separation from her grandmother Celia in her early infancy, when she is only two, is highly stressful and painful. Pilar, in the same way as Lourdes, has vivid memories of her early life, including those of their separation and her family’s escape from Cuba. As she remembers the episode:

“I was sitting in my grandmother’s lap, playing with her drop pearl earrings, when my mother told her we were leaving the country...Mom tried to pull me away but I clung to Abuela and screamed at the top of my lungs. My grandfather came running and said, ‘Celia, let the girl go. She belongs with Lourdes.’ That was the last time I saw her” (Garcia 26).

The pain she goes through at that moment haunts her and surfaces in her adulthood. Regarding the effects of stressful separations, Carola Suárez-Orozco argues that “[e]vents such as moves, job changes, and ruptures in relationships are known to be highly disruptive, often triggering a variety of reactions including anxiety, anger, depression, somatic complaints, and illness” (195). Pilar is separated from her grandmother and from her



homeland at the same time and that is traumatic for her. A difficult relationship with Lourdes adds to her suffering and feeling of isolation. Davis contends that “Celia provides Pilar with the connection to the maternal line, mother tongue, and homeland her mother had severed, as well as a sense of security and self-worth.” Although until her teens she has a good relationship with her father Rufino, there is a disruption as she finds out that he is having an affair. This event triggers her escape to Miami as an attempt to reach Cuba: “That’s it. My mind’s made up. I’m going back to Cuba. I’m fed up with everything around here” (Garcia 25). However, she does not accomplish it because her relatives in Miami would not agree to that. Separation and isolation are replicated in Pilar, geographically and psychologically. Yet, differently from her mother and grandmother, she acknowledges the harmful effect they have on her in that she believes that going back to Cuba and to Celia would give her a sense of self-understanding and a place in the world.

According to Vasquez, Pilar “has a solitary hunger of her own. Hers is the yearning for connection, a longing for her roots and legacy.” This lack of roots is extremely disturbing for Pilar, as she also refuses to be fully assimilated in the US culture. She also feels the need to have her own version of her past and her own perception of Cuba, one that is inherently different from Lourdes’s. She is also aware that even though her telepathic connection with Celia gives her a feeling of security for some time, it does not fulfill her craving for her own history, her home country’s and her family’s. Pilar also questions the way patriarchy registers history, always through men’s point of view: “If it were up to me, I’d record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay... Why don’t I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what’s important?” (Garcia 28). Pilar’s desire to rewrite history displays her own search for her heritage and her subjectivity, one that would be empowered, independent from others’ guidance and control.

Pilar's identification with the idealists of her family – Celia, Felicia, Rufino – is emphasized through the narrative. As she arrives in Cuba, she has mixed feelings about Cuba. She is happy to see her grandmother, but surprised at her depressive state and old age. She is struck by the propaganda of the revolution in the billboards (Garcia 215) and by the beauty she finds everywhere. Her reunion with Celia is fundamental as she receives her legacy – Celia's letters to Gustavo – and eventually discovers that her subjectivity is both rooted in Cuba and in the US. However, in the end Pilar is aware of the fact that it is impossible for her to cope with the repression of the regime, and although she is afraid of losing her grandmother again she decides to leave Cuba. She concludes, "I know now it's where I belong (New York) – not *instead* of here, but more than here" (Garcia 236).

Her helping Ivanito to escape from Cuba is part of her exercising agency and getting empowered by taking her own decisions. It is a difficult step because she lies to Celia about her participation in the event, and in the end communication between them fails: "My thoughts feel like broken glass in my head. I can't understand what my grandmother tells me. All I hear is her voice, thickened with pain" (Garcia 240). Pilar's decision indicates also a turn in favor of Lourdes, as it was the latter's initiative to send Ivanito to the Peruvian Embassy. Pilar reconnects with her past and begins a journey that might bring the bonding with her mother and some healing to the trauma of separation.

All the women characters studied in this chapter are closely connected to each other in what concerns their traumas. They share similarities regarding the political regimes in their home countries, namely the dictatorships in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, as both dictators represent themselves through images of hypersexualized powerful men. The abandonments suffered by Marina, Celia, Lourdes, and Felicia are significant in causing traumas. Additionally, the traumas originated by death are painful and have serious consequences for both Aurelia's and Celia's families.

The difficulties Aurelia and Celia encounter in face of patriarchy are very similar, although they have different economic situations and upbringing – Celia is from a poor family, but receives a more liberal education with her aunt. They are subdued under patriarchal norm, and their submission does have harmful effects for their daughters Marina, Rebecca, Iliana, Lourdes, and Felicia. However, they differ in that Aurelia becomes empowered by her return to the spiritual forces inherited from her mother, while Celia seems unable to find a goal for her life. Celia is taken over by her traumas and losses and commits suicide. The relationship with the primary caretaker is relevant in that the daughters' subjectivities suffer severe fragmentation which is a direct result of poor interaction or total lack of it, as are the cases of Felicia and Lourdes.

Traumatic events are also often bequeathed from the matriarchs to their daughters. Aurelia is traumatized by her brother's suicide, by fear and poverty, and Marina, Rebecca and Iliana inherit her traumas. Lourdes is traumatized by her mother's abandonment, and Felicia is by Jorge's, and both women end up suffering from mental or physical disorders. Felicia and Rebecca are unable to construct their subjectivities independently of others' responses, and disappointments, sexual oppression, and the violence they suffer also traumatize them. Marina does depend on others to assert herself, a trait she has in common with Felicia and Rebecca. She also shares some similarities with Lourdes regarding her alleged rape: they both present post-trauma symptoms such as overeating and constant flashbacks as a result of sexual abuse. Marina, however, tries to call attention to the event, whereas Lourdes keeps silent about it. Marina ends up mad, and Lourdes remains unable to voice her trauma, except with her dead father. Iliana initially presents post-traumatic symptoms after the rape perpetrated by her own sister, especially through denial and numbing. Yet, she is resilient enough to see that her path to a healthy mental state would begin by her leaving home and by taking control over her life. She is moved by the desire to construct her subjectivity through her past life and her

mother's, in the same way as Pilar is. Both women feel the need to establish connections with a past they ignore but which surely empowers them, especially in relation to their spiritual legacy. The presence of Santeria is a vital bridge that connects both women to their mother – Iliana's – and grandmother – Pilar's – and to their homelands, the Dominican Republic and Cuba.

## CHAPTER 3 RACE MATTERS

### 3.1 Geographies of Ethnicity and Race

In this chapter I discuss the issues of race and ethnicity and the implications of racism in both novels and their connection to the traumatic events the women characters undergo. The concepts of ethnicity and race are rather complex and intricate bringing deep consequences for the characters' process of subjectivity construction. Because of that I initially develop a theoretical discussion on both concepts and relate them to my analysis of the women characters in both novels. Further on, I discuss the way racism is represented in both novels and relate it to some of the characters' traumas.

Kate A. Berry and Martha L. Henderson state that

“[a]lthough race and ethnicity are socially constructed identities that cannot be easily dismissed, racial and ethnic categories are neither inherently natural nor self-evident... While physical scientific evidence does not support the notion of autonomous races, social conditioning teaches how to recognize certain inscribed aspects of race and ethnicity, for example, the color of one's skin or the origin of one's ancestors” (4).

Both scholars claim that racial and ethnic identities shape social action and political practices and the way institutions operate (4). The socio-political and family contexts that I discussed in the previous chapter dictate the patriarchal norms the women characters are often subject to and shape the perception they have of themselves and of their role as women. Equally important, the social conditionings that shape these characters' subjectivity construction determine their understanding of ethnic and racial configurations and their behavior regarding the racism that they, in one way or another, have to face. These characters' perception of their ethnicity and race subsequently produce effects upon the social contexts,

shaping social and political practices in an endless cycle. The statements as well as the interrogations some characters present regarding race and ethnicity unveil the complex relationship between these concepts in the process of subjectivity construction and the contexts into which they are inserted. It is, therefore, relevant to discuss this relationship.

Regarding race, Kwame Anthony Appiah states that the culture in modern world was shaped by the notion of the Anglo-Saxon supremacy over other peoples and that this idea resulted in a set of assumptions about race, shaping our understanding of literature and of symbolic culture. Appiah affirms that since the earliest human written records there were references to how people viewed their own kind and the “others.” To define the “Other,” these ancient theories focus mainly on physical appearance and on ancestry to explain the differences between groups of people (274). An example of these theories is how Hippocrates in the fifth century B.C. E. explains the so-called superiority of the Greeks in relation to peoples of Western Asia by affirming that the Greek soil, on which is hard to grow plants, is the reason why the Greeks are tougher and more independent. In this line of thought, the environment is responsible for some of the Greeks’ characteristics; however, these features would change if they moved to other lands with different environmental conditions. Although the Greeks found both the black Ethiopians and the blonde Scythians inferior to the Hellenes, this inferiority could be “corrected” through individual character, regardless of skin color (Appiah 275). In the Old Testament, however, the distinction between peoples is determined not by physical appearance but by their relationship with God, in the covenant established with Him. Thus, in the history of ancient peoples, the definition of “the other” depended on characteristics other than the physical ones such as skin color.

Appiah claims that the Victorian nineteenth century brought about the notion that humankind was divided into groups of individuals who shared biological, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other, but not with members of other races. This racialist

theory postulated that characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, intelligence, honesty, and literary “genius” were inherited from an individual’s racial essence (276). The twentieth century inherited this belief; however, biologists and anthropologists have rejected it on the basis that it does not reflect reality. They believe that the classification of people as Negro, Caucasian, and Mongoloid are not relevant categorizations because there are individuals who do not fit them. Moreover, features such as skin pigmentation and hair texture, for instance, account for very little of the biological characteristics. Appiah adds that the differences among peoples have a key role in our interrogations about the self, in formatting our values, and in determining our identities (276-87).

Along the same lines, Karim Murji defines race as “ a politically charged and ambivalent word that has evaded precise definition. Some put “race” into quotation marks to highlight its constructed and ideological nature and to underline that it has no real biological referent. It is, however, socially and politically significant and has real effects because inequalities are reproduced through practices of racism” (290-91). In similar ways, both Appiah and Karim evidence that “race” is a political construct and that it is not grounded in biology, but rather on social and cultural inscriptions.

Werner Sollors argues that, allied to nationalism, ethnicity “has spread with particular intensity since the times of the American and French Revolutions” (289). He adds that differently from aristocracy, which ruled from “personal knowledge and family relationships,” the bourgeois power , “was dependent upon a shared interest among people who might never meet but who could feel connected through literature” (289). Literary manifestations such as “newspapers, broadsides, manifestoes, popular songs, as well as plays, poems, epics, and novels” (289), have kept individuals connected, giving them a feeling of belonging (289). This sense of belonging established the concept of a nation, and consequently, of nationality. According to Sollors, the genealogy of the term “ethnic” has its

origin in the Greek word “ethnikos,” which meant “gentile,” and “heathen.” He adds that “the word was used to refer not just to people in general but also to “others.”

In English the meaning shifted from “non-Israelite” to non-Christian. Thus the word retained its quality of defining another people contrastively, and often negatively” (25). Sollors adds that from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century the term was recurrently used in the sense of “heathen,” and that only after the mid-nineteenth century did it gain the meaning of “peculiar to a race or nation.” Yet “the English language has retained the pagan memory of “ethnic,” often secularized in the sense of ethnic as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as not fully American” (Sollors 25). Although the word “race” has already been used to refer to various kinds of groups such as the Irish race or the Jewish race, Sollors contends that because of the genocides perpetrated in the name of “race,” the term has acquired a “bad” connotation because of its association with a notion of biological determinism. That resulted in its current replacement by the word “ethnicity.” Sollors chooses to see race as one aspect of ethnicity, and considers the latter more inclusive than any other term that has been in use so far (38-39).

Concerning “ethnicity,” Murji criticizes what he calls “paradoxes of ethnicity”:  
 “Ethnicity is both chic and dangerous, as a component of fashionable commodities, on the one hand, or as something base and elemental, on the other” (113). Stuart Hall has coined the term “new ethnicities” to refer to the “recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black,’” which he also sees as a political and cultural construction (225). Moreover, Hall argues that “one of the predicates of racism” is that blacks “all look the same,” a statement that essentializes “the black experience” – as stated by Hall – disregarding the differences among black subjects (225). These “new ethnicities,” says Hall, “acknowledge the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, ... and engage rather



than suppress *difference*” (226, author’s emphasis ). Concerning Hall’s term , Murji says: “the plural ‘ethnicities’ is itself significant in emphasizing internal group differentiation, and ethnicity as a process of becoming rather than a state of being (114). Appiah’s and Sollor’s theories on race and ethnicity, respectively, are significant in that they trace the historical origins of both terms. Hall’s theorization of “new ethnicities”, on the other hand, stresses the importance of looking at ethnicity – and race, consequently – through the various differences that constitute one’s subjectivity and identity. This theorization is relevant for my discussion in this chapter because my claim that the women characters in both novels have their subjectivities fragmented by various traumas takes into consideration the various elements that construct these women’s selves. Accordingly, perceptions of ethnicity and race are among them, as well as other aspects Hall mentions. Although both terms might be used in association, their meanings, as employed here, follow the notion of the terms as cultural and social constructs that highlight a process of becoming.

The novels in study bring to light a noteworthy discussion on the themes of ethnicity and race and the consequence of internalized racism. Notably, the women characters in *Geographies of Home* identify themselves as Dominicans, and although they immigrate at different ages – Iliana and Marina as children, Rebecca as a young adult, and Aurelia as an adult – they are all connected with what can be considered an ethnic group from the Dominican Republic. In the present chapter I focus on the analysis of Iliana and Marina for their perception of ethnical and racial issues is much more noticeable and problematic than the other women characters’ in the novel. The process of subjectivity construction for them is shaped by strong beliefs concerning ethnicity and race and is determined by racist ideologies as well. The racial/ethnic issues constitute for them the repressing elements that trigger traumatic experiences which add to the other traumas previously discussed.

Regarding *Dreaming in Cuban*, both concepts are also significant concepts, but it may be argued that Garcia does not tackle them as overtly as Pérez does. This subtlety is worth discussing exactly because of its design: it seems to expose the undercurrent racism in Cuban society, and the social and cultural implications of racial issues that often occur in the Caribbean and Latin American countries. Concerning the novel's approach to the mentioned issues, Johnson affirms that the novel not only "challenges the patriarchal presence that dominates the political system of Cuba", but it also "rejects the power structure of pre-revolutionary Cuba that is drawn directly along the color line as well as class" (79). Because Garcia gives especial attention to the presence of the African tradition in Cuba's society – especially through Santería – it is important to discuss some characters' connection with that legacy as a vital element that shape their subjectivities and also because Santería in the novel provides us with an approach to the ethnic and racial problems that underlie the formation of Cuba as a nation. As to Santería, George Brandon defines it as

a New World neo-African religion with a clear dual heritage. Its component traditions include European Christianity (in the form of Spanish folk Catholicism), traditional African religion (in the form of orisha worship as practiced by the Yoruba of Nigeria), and Kardecian spiritism, which originated in France in the nineteenth century and became fashionable in both the Caribbean and South America (1-2)

In the novel, the characters Felicia, Pilar and Herminia embrace Santería for different reasons, but in the end they become connected through it.

### 3.1.1 The Dominican Republic and the USA: Places that Matter

Berry and Henderson point out that “[p]lace matters in the experiences and processes that shape racial and ethnic identity. Racial and ethnic identities do not exist in a vacuum; the places and space in which individuals and groups operate influence how race and ethnicity come to be understood, expressed, and experienced” (3). Both *Geographies of Home* and *Dreaming in Cuban* portray characters that dislocate from the Caribbean, a group of countries that share many similarities in the history of racial systems. The socio-political context of the US determines the characters’ understanding of racial and ethnic identity in the experience of diaspora, but it also modifies previous, solidified racial and ethnic identities constructed in their country of origin. In the specific case of *Geographies of Home*, for Iliana and Marina the shock between old and new forms of identification result in fragmentation and traumas. The Dominican family in *Geographies of Home* is of African descent, and its members display various skin tones. Iliana is dark-skinned while Marina is called “colora” by her siblings for “her yellowish skin and the faint trace of red in her dark hair” (Pérez 99). However, Marina also presents physical traits that identify her as black, and that is a complicating factor in her process of subjectivity construction.

James F. Davis in *Who is Black?* argues that in the US “the nation’s answer to the question ‘who is black?’ has long been that a black is any person with any known African black ancestry” (5). This definition is also known as ‘the one-drop rule,’ or as ‘hypo-descent rule’ – as defined by anthropologists (5). In his study, Davis states that the term “black” replaced the word “negro” during the black power movement and he therefore uses ‘black’ to refer mainly to “persons with any black African lineage” (5). In my research I choose to use “black,” following Davis’s line of thought, and also because in both novels the authors use the term in the same manner. On the other hand, there are theorists who use “Black” – with a

capital letter – to refer to the same group Davis does. It seems that there is not a consensus about the use of the term, and in quoting these scholars I follow their choice, be it “black” or “Black”.

The one-drop rule is unique because it only exists in the US, while the definition of blackness is highly variable in other countries (Davis 13). For Davis this definition is closely connected to the history of the US and incorporates beliefs that were practiced in the South to justify slavery and segregation (15). Ginetta E. B. Candelario in “Color Matters,” points out that “while the United States developed and institutionalized a binary White/Black racial order, Latin American and Caribbean countries created racial continuum systems, both products of their respective colonial and national histories...The US binary predicated Whiteness and Blackness upon the absence or presence of a single African and/or ‘Black’ ancestor” (338). For Caribbean peoples and Latina/os in general, this binary categorization is complicated because they may not see themselves as blacks, the reason being that in their countries of origin they might be considered white. Mary C. Waters states that:

In the folk usage of (the) terms (“ethnic” and “racial”), in present-day America, whites and blacks are racial groups distinct from one another based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features – physical characteristics that define a person as socially white or black. Ethnic groups refer to groups that share practices, languages, behaviors, or ancestral origin. Italians and Poles are ethnic groups... Yet Americans have generally paid a great deal of attention to ethnic differences within the white race, while treating black Americans as if they were both a racial and an ethnic group with no intraracial differences (45).

In Iliana’s case, it is possible to see the complexity of the one-drop rule label for any dark-skinned person in the US. Despite her complex positioning as a Dominican migrant of

African descent, that complexity is erased in the context of the binary racial system in the USA because of her racial heritage and phenotype.

Iliana is aware of the ethnic group she belongs to and of her racial inheritance. However, in the US the distinction between the two notions is blurred because her phenotype presents her as black, and that is the preeminent element within the one-drop rule system. For Iliana, the double categorization of immigrant and black – under the one-drop rule – generates a feeling of displacement and discomfort. Because the sense of self is shattered, it is also traumatic. Waters adds that “[a]rriving as a stranger in a new society, the immigrant must decide how he or she self-identifies, and the people in the host society must decide how they categorize or identify the immigrant.... The social identities the immigrants adopt or are assigned can have enormous consequences for individuals” (44). For Iliana, this dynamics is painful and traumatic because her identification in the US is based on the skin color of her African heritage and on her Spanish accent. These are regarded as opposite traits, and she is unable to fit in the groups that interpellate her as the following quote shows:

she had yearned to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she could be easily identified as belonging to either group. She would have traded her soul to have the long, straight hair and olive skin of her Spanish-speaking friends or to wear her hair in cornrows and have no trace of a Spanish accent like the Johnson girls down the street. She used to hate the question ‘Where you from?’. ... She used to feel like a rope in a game of tug-of-war. ... With her skin color identifying her as a member of one group and her accent and immigrant status placing her in another, she had fit comfortably in neither (Pérez 190-91)

The above quote evokes Waters's argument according to which "the construction and adoption of a racial and ethnic social identity represent an ongoing negotiation between self and other identification, which reflects the meanings attached to possible identities and boundaries" (46). In Iliana's case, the meanings attached to her identification in the US seem irreconcilable, and throughout the narrative the negotiation Waters refers to remains unaccomplished. Nevertheless, Iliana identifies herself as black, despite the feeling of non-belonging and the racism she is subject to in the US.

As for Marina, she also acknowledges her Dominicaness but denies her race, despite the traits indicative of her black ancestry. As her primary source of ethnic and racial identification is forged by Dominican socio-political and family contexts, her physical characteristics lead her to believe she is white. In the US, however, she is considered black, and this categorization comes with painful consequences for her. The double categorization of black and immigrant is highly traumatic because her self-identification is based on her ethnicity – Hispanic – and she refuses the label of black because the racist system prevailing in the Dominican Republic determines a different understanding of ethnicity and race. Silvio Torres-Saillant claims that the category "Hispanic" consists of "people who, regardless of race, trace their origins to the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas" (363). Marina chooses not to negotiate her identification and identify herself as Hispanic in order to avoid the label the one-drop rule assigns her: black. However, the refusal to accept this label is useless because despite her light skin, her traits cannot be disguised – she cannot pass as a white. Candelario argues that, "[t]hat Latina/os in the United States (who) are non-White often occludes the fact that in their Latin American and Caribbean countries of origin and heritage, many identify and/or are identified as White, ... even in the absence of outside support for that claim" (338). In the Dominican Republic Marina could have comfortably asserted her Hispanic heritage and her so called whiteness, because she would not be under

the one-drop rule. The US binary racial categorization, however, does not allow such freedom. The Dominican racial categorization is, in fact, to be accounted for Marina's racism towards her own racial heritage.

In *Geographies of Home*, the characters are not only marked by their Dominicaness but also by a peculiar view concerning racial identification. According to Saillant, "Dominican society is the cradle of blackness in the Americas. Santo Domingo served as the port of entry to the first African slaves who arrived in Spain's newly conquered territories following the transatlantic voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492" (110). Saillant argues that the number of Africans increased as the demand for laborers became greater, especially for work in the mines and later in the sugar-cane plantations (111). With the annihilation of the indigenous peoples, their replacement by African slaves seemed the most profitable and easier solution. Candelario points out that Spanish and Portuguese colonization differed from the English in that in the former the settlers had limited access to European women. That led to a tolerance towards relationships with indigenous and African women (340). It is significant that the success of the sugar-cane processing is closely connected with the origins of anti-black racism as it brought forth a concept that associated slavery with blackness – the racialization of slavery. The result of importing slaves was that their population outnumbered that of whites. Later, as the plantation economy declined, many slaves were freed, and as they could not leave, they stayed in the country, and their number kept rising (Saillant 110-12).

Candelario affirms that the Spanish tried to control the heterogeneous population through a *Casta* system, with groups defined by socioeconomic status and race. At the very bottom were the Africans, followed by the indigenous (still at the bottom) and the Spanish Peninsulars at the top. Between these castes were heterogeneous groups classified in relation to the Spanish heritage. These intermediate castes resulted in the possibility of inter- and intragenerational shifts in castes. Candelario claims that "through reproductive and cultural

strategies – mating/marrying lighter, assimilating Hispanic language, dress, religion, and food way; becoming literate and educated – one and one’s lineage could become upwardly mobile in the socio-racial order” (340-41). She contends, however, that the access to higher castes was made virtually impossible because wealth was concentrated in the hands of the oligarchy that lived on the coerced labor of Indians and Africans. The shifts between castes were more difficult even with the Industrial Revolution and the advent of capitalism because the economic systems of the new nations were based on the accumulation of capital. This resulted in higher class inequality and in an individualized race inequality, where one’s success or failure was oriented by racial self-improvement. This situation helped naturalize – making it more invisible – and institutionalize the white supremacist ideology conveyed in the socio-racial systems that existed throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. The result of that, according to Candelario, was the strong racial miscegenation, negrophobia, the pursuit of whiteness, and color and phenotype hierarchies (341-42).

Along the same line, Waters states that,

“[n]owhere in the Caribbean is race a simple bipolar distinction between white and black. Race is more a continuum in which shade and other physical characteristics, as well as social characteristics such as class position, are taken into account in the social process of categorization. The determination of race is quite variable, different local codes predominate in different islands or in different parts of the same island” (29).

Although the Caribbean islands colonized by Spain shared many similarities in the realm of their socio-cultural formation, the racial issue in each island takes on specific characteristics which allow more flexibility for individual self-identification. Waters adds that the multiracial and multiethnic mixing that took place in the Caribbean resulted in a “Creole



culture in that no particular parts were indigenous, and the parts of Africa, Europe, and Asia that survived were combined and passed on from generation to generation” (21). Through the Dominican family portrayed in the novel it is possible to see the inter and intraracial miscegenation that occurred in the Caribbean, as the family members exhibited different skin tones and physical traits.

Concerning the history of the Dominican Republic, one factor that complicates the concepts of ethnicity and race for its people is its relation with Haiti – both countries constitute the island of Hispaniola. According to Stinchcomb, the “redefinition of Dominicans’ racial identity began with Haiti winning its independence from France in 1804 and establishing itself as America’s first country ruled by blacks. Because of the constant disputes about border territories between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the first black invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1801 was no surprise to its Spanish-speaking neighbors” (2). In the invasion Toussaint-Louverture was supported by most Dominicans; however, his dream of an indivisible island controlled by ex-slaves was not welcomed by the white class, which then helped restore French rule in 1802, by means of which slavery was reinstated. Because of Spain’s neglect of the colony since the sixteenth century, the socio-economic condition of the free population did not diverge much. Nevertheless, to explain the physical differences between the whites – descendants of Spaniards – and the descendants of African slaves, Dominicaness was defined by only two groups: the *blancos* (whites and lighter mulattoes) and *blancos de la tierra* (darker mulattoes). Regarding the blacks, slaves or their offspring, which were the majority of the population, they began to be erased from Dominican official discourse (Stinchcomb 3).

There were subsequent attempts by the Haitians to reunite the island, and they succeeded in doing that in 1822. The Dominican Republic was unified to Haiti for twenty-two years, and it resulted in a turning point for the black and mulatto population in the island

(Saillant 115). Saillant points out that, “[d]espite the claim by an inveterate anti-Haitian and conservative elite that Dominicans never mingled with Haitians, unification brought about an intensified rapport between the two populations” (115). The proximity and short unification with Haiti resulted in a complicated racial identity for Dominicans, “inducing in the population a reticence towards their own blackness” (Saillant 109). Because of the period in which Dominicans stayed under Haitian rule, they began to cling to a national ideology that emphasized their “Hispanicity” and transferred the label of blackness to Haitians.

Equally important, the flexibility of this racial system was redefined during Trujillo’s regime. The identification of the Dominicans was then linked to Taino peoples who inhabited the island during the Spanish conquest and who were annihilated in a short period of time. Saillant observes that, “[e]thnically the Taino represented a category typified by non-whiteness as well as non-blackness, which could easily accommodate the racial in-betweenness of the Dominican mulatto.... the Trujillo regime preferred it ... because the term was devoid of any semantic allusion to the African heritage and would thus accord with their negrophobic definition of Dominicanness” (133). In the novel analyzed, this in-betweenness is often expressed in the term “Hispanic” that Marina chooses to identify herself with, demonstrating her rejection of blackness. The estrangement with the Haitians, the social inequalities brought forth by the Spanish caste system in colonial times, and the undercurrent racism in Trujillo’s regime lead most Dominicans to turn away from the category they believe holds the stigma of low status and lack of civilization, despite the high number of blacks and mulattos in the population.

### 3.1.2 Racism and Trauma

While the practices mentioned previously occurred domestically in Europe and the US, the Caribbean countries were categorized as non-white and, in a demonstration of their racist views, they were considered as biologically degenerate. Thus, the so-called racial egalitarianism of Latin America and the Caribbean coexisted with an “incorporative and seemingly porous” racism (Candelario 342). All the predicaments I have discussed so far emerge from the experience of diaspora, and according to Candelario, although white supremacy is not new to Latinas/os and Caribbeans, they face a new experience of “being personally re-categorized as non-white and experiencing overt rather than latent racism, simply by virtue of being from Latin America or the Caribbean and notwithstanding their particular country’s racial reputation in the region or their personal phenotype” (342). Along the same line, Waters argues that “[t]his permeation of race in everyday culture in the United States is ... hard for immigrants to cope with” (34). In *Geographies of Home*, of all the hardships the Dominican family encounters in the US, racism seems to be the most traumatic, especially for Marina and Iliana.

Candelario adds that “both the socio-racial system through which they (immigrants) are defined and their own racial categorization (and perhaps their racial identity) changes upon immigration, often in a downward or negative direction” (342). The consequence of this new labeling is that “Latinas/os often engage in symbolic strategies to distance themselves from Blackness, and in life strategies to distance themselves from Blacks” (344). In an attitude that endorses Candelario’s argument, Marina does engage herself in strategies to validate her self-identification as a “Hispanic.” Her means of asserting her Hispanic identity become more desperate after the white attorney refuses to have a relationship with her, and she sees his blonde, green-eyed secretary. Marina then “relaxed and dyed her hair a brighter

orange in the hopes of further embodying that name (“colora””) (Pérez 99). Nevertheless, the validation of this self-contradicting identity seems utterly impossible because the Dominican racist categorization prevails within the family as well, as when Beatriz – through Iliana’s memories – affirms that Marina is doomed to a life of spinsterhood, “[n]o one, she had claimed, would ever consider her attractive. Not with her baboon nose and nigger lips. So Marina had better resign herself to becoming an old maid” (Pérez 42). Davis claims that, “[m]isperceptions of racial differences appear to derive at least in part from living in a society with a one-drop rule. Physical features are so important as indicators of ethnic identity that they are often accentuated. . . . Perceptions of and beliefs about the physical differences . . . are affected by cultural differences and experiences with the groups concerned (160). As an example for Davis’ argument, Beatriz’s comments about Marina’s black traits might indicate that in the US’s social context the former’s perception of her sister’s black ancestry might be negatively accentuated by the one –drop rule. Consequently, for Beatriz, these black traits would prevent Marina from finding a husband. For Marina, association with whiteness is the solution for her to overcome her self-contempt. As this connection does not take place, it seems impossible for her to deal with the oppression her self-denial brings about, especially considering her psychic history and the social trauma she suffers before immigrating.

Although Marina grows up in the US, the Dominican racial definition is inscribed in her and she believes it to be true. Yet, it cannot coexist with the US concept of the one-drop rule because they annul each other as opposite socio-political practices, and that brings about Marina’s racial trauma. She often demonstrates fear of being seen as she really is, a person with black heritage and phenotype. Her internalized racism manifests itself also in her attempt to disinfect her skin with Lysol after her alleged rape, unveiling the imprisonment of her mind and soul as she cannot accept the miscegenation in her own body. As a consequence, Marina’s internalized racism becomes traumatic and brings forth mental disorders. In regard

to the internalization of racism Gerald Cunningham claims that, “[i]nternalized racism supports the notion the White is right, White is superior and, in fact, White is the standard. All of this can lead to a dangerous and self-destructive love affair with Whiteness. In short, internalized racism is self-hatred” (5). It is my belief that the way Marina tries to enact the Dominican racial discourse in the US, her self-hatred, and the shock as she acknowledges her blackness – after the attorney “refuses her” – add to her unending depressive state and trigger her mental breakdown and subsequent psychosis. It seems to me that her alleged rape by a black man not only voices her extreme hatred and rejection of her own blackness but also reflects the current US’s racism that created the myth of the black rapist.

As for Iliana, she experiences racism at the university, as she finds the word “nigger” inscribed on the message board on her room door (Pérez 1). Disappointment changes into bitterness and rage as she is also aware of the various stereotypes constructed to justify the prejudice against blacks, such as “inherent laziness, lack of motivation, welfare dependency and intellectual deficiency” (Pérez 71). However, she tries to train herself not to see or hear these manifestations. Similarly to what happens to most people who experience racism, Iliana’s existence in the hostile environment is based on denial of the pain inflicted by racial trauma. Regarding this issue, Herman states that, “[d]enial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level” (2). Denial, pretty much like numbing, is a reaction to traumatic experiences. Despite her self-control, Iliana is overcome by a “rage (that) turned her body against itself, transforming her stomach into an acidic mass that heaved bitterness into her mouth” (Pérez 71). Iliana does not internalize the stereotypes projected by the US’s one-drop rule; however, she is traumatized by racism and her body suffers the consequences of the pain she undergoes on trying to face it. She is also fully aware of the Dominican racist system operating within her family, as Marina points out when they argue about Iliana’s preference for black men:

Marina snickered. “A big, black stud. That’s what you want.”

“Yeah,” Iliana retorted. “A big-black-man-with-a-great-big-dick.

What would be wrong with that if I did?”

“Only that you could do better.” ... “You know how black men are.”

... “They’re lazy as shit and undependable.”

“You’ve been watching too much TV,” Iliana snapped.

“TV, my ass. Look at all your brothers.”

“Look at yourself. You’re suffering from the same thing they are, thinking anything lighter must be better.” (Pérez 38).

In her hatred of blackness, Marina voices the stereotypical notion constructed by colonial discourses that claimed, as described by Davis, that darker skins were indicative of a lower status and quality (161), whereas Iliana does not surrender to it, rejecting the racism her sister so overtly manifests.

Iliana’s rejection of her family’s racism is also portrayed in her views about her brother Gabriel and his wife Laurie. She is white and does not like to gather with the family, nor is she intimate with any of them. Laurie is portrayed as having US cultural values that the Dominicans do not accept or practice, and exhibits her “whiteness” to the family and other blacks, as in the episode on the bus, in which Laurie, seated between two women, brushes her hair incessantly provoking their anger. As a result, one of the women snatches the brush from Laurie’s hand and throws it on the floor. Laurie curses, “[d]amned kinky-headed bitch!” ... ‘Probably jealous of my hair!’” (108-09). Iliana also observes that her brother Gabriel had in fact wanted to marry a white for thinking about the racial superiority of whites, but he chooses somebody that ends up by refusing to have physical intimacy with him. Iliana ponders on this weird situation: “Gabriel had deserved it all... Deserved it after years of craving a white woman and accusing black women of being the ugliest, loudest and most

demanding” (Pérez 107). Making a joke that reveals his internalized racism, Gabriel compares a Latina, a black, and a white woman during sex, and through his comparison it is clear that Laurie is a metaphor for the image of purity white women have incarnated since medieval times, while black women are related to bestiality: “a Latina cooing in the midst of sex, ‘Ay Papito! Ay Papito!; a black woman shouting, ‘Give it to me, mother-fucker! Give it to me now!’ and a white woman whispering some nonsense” (Pérez 107). In this sense, Laurie is the embodiment of the white woman. In fact, by refusing sex with her husband Laurie becomes, in her husband’s racist and misogynist views, the chaste “angel in the house,” not commanded by her sexual desire – an image always associated with purity for women – while the black woman becomes the monster that demands sexual satisfaction. Pushed by the mandates of the one-drop rule combined with the racist attitudes learned in the Dominican Republic and their need to fit in their host land, Gabriel and other family members, differently from Iliana, evoke their own internalized racism.

In *Black Identities*, Waters states that, “[h]istory and current power relations create and shape the opportunities people face in their day-to-day lives, giving some people ‘ethnic options’ and others ‘racial labels’ (47). Concerning the options and labels Waters refers to, although the one-drop rule system assigns racial categorizations that entrap any dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks as well, Iliana, unlike Marina, does choose to identify with her black heritage. This way she does not fall prey to the alienation caused by the shock between her racial identity and the label as “other” mentioned by Kennedy and discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Although she undergoes a social trauma because of racism, in line with what I discuss in the previous chapters, Iliana’s search for self-knowledge, her connection to her Dominican legacy and her resiliency enable her not to internalize the self-hatred Marina exhibits. The outcomes of the social and punctual traumas she suffers – racism and rape – are left open in the end of the novel; however, among all her siblings, Iliana is the most prepared

to endure the painful handling of these predicaments, and because of that, is likely to achieve some sort of healing.

How is the non-white individual subjectivity affected by the one-drop rule and the racism that it conveys in the context of US's society? Joe R. Feagin and Karyn D. McKinney, in a research about the costs of racism in the US, call attention to the World Health Organization's definition of "human health":

a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Thus, human health is much more than the absence of infirmity and disease; it involves positive well-being and the active possession of basic human rights, such as the right to be free of racial discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations, and the right to fairness and social justice in one's everyday life (7).

Nevertheless, both scholars add that this state of well-being is very hard to achieve because of discrimination. They claim that racism is systemic and prevents African Americans and other Americans of color from enjoying the well-being defined above. For them, since the first time the term "racism" was used in Germany to define anti-Semitism in the 1930s, it "was intended to denote a *system* of racialized oppression." In this way, "[d]iscrimination thus involves actions, as well as one or more *discriminators* and one or more targets" (18, authors' emphasis). This systemic antiblack racism brings about "negative health consequences," although it is not possible to have a full understanding of these outcomes, according to both scholars (32). They affirm that these consequences occur "through the generation of *additional, often high, levels of stress beyond those faced by white people* in the same or similar social settings – added stress that, in its turn, creates or aggravates psychological and physical problems" (Feagin and McKinney 32, authors' emphasis). In the case of *Geographies of Home*, for Iliana, this high level of stress is channeled through her body – in



turning against itself and her psyche, deriving in denial and avoidance of contact with people around her. As for Marina, for the reasons discussed above, the consequences of this stress are much more harmful and result in suicidal tendencies, menace to other people's physical integrity and even in madness.

Why do the sisters exhibit different behaviors when facing racism if they both share the same ethnic ancestry and belong to the same family environment? The answer could be explained by Feagin and McKinney's findings concerning the attitudes one can usually take to fight racism. They claim that one of them is avoiding the internalization of "racist stereotypes of black Americans as intellectually or morally inferior to white Americans" (132). Other strategies used to deal with "racial antipathy and discrimination" include shaping or changing the attitudes one has about her/himself, and that change might result in "increased self-confidence" (132). Iliana exhibits these attitudes, despite her traumas and uncertainties about her own self, and that might account for her mental stability and her strong understanding of her subjectivity as a black woman. Feagin and McKinney ponder that "[r]ecent studies have shown that those who substantially internalize some of the negative, white-racist views of African Americans are more likely to have problems with severe psychological distress, lowered self-esteem, and alcoholism than those who successfully fight this internalization" (132). As shown above, Marina, unlike Iliana, internalizes the negative stereotypes, and clings to the self-depreciation that permeates her self-identification. For this reason, it seems impossible for her to escape the painful effects of her racial trauma.

### **3.2 Ethnic and Racial Issues in Cuba**

The formation of Cuba as a nation, similarly to the Dominican Republic, is marked by the African presence used in coerced labor in sugar plantations. Franklin Knight claims that,

“[b]etween 1790 and 1860, the fastest growing segment of the population was that of the slaves, imported legally and illegally from Africa, ... taking advantage of the collapse in Saint-Domingue. By 1840, nonwhites outnumbered whites by a small number” (229). Yet, Cuba was not entirely a slave-structured society. Worried that the situation that occurred in Haiti might happen in Cuba, the settlers reduced immigration – by reducing the number of nonwhites – and eventually ended the slave trade (Knight 229). Nancy Morejón, in “Race and Nation,” claims that the people now called Cubans are the result of a highly heterogeneous profile that comes from the various peoples – or ethnic groups – that made up the Spanish nation, and from the African slaves, who came from the West coast of Africa. Of the latter, she affirms that they “had very different tribal and ethnic origins. They spoke evolved languages – some with grammar, others without – but they were all linguistically distinct from one another” (230). Moreover, added to the two main components of the Cuban people were the Indians, Chinese, and Jewish, and of these groups, in fact, the Chinese were to undergo slave exploitation as well. For Morejón, “it is impossible to perceive or conceive of Cuba’s national identity ignoring or even downplaying its essentially miscegenous condition” (231-32). Knight’s and Morejón’s theories are relevant for my analysis of *Dreaming in Cuban* because the miscegenation they describe seems to be portrayed in the various characters in the novel through their phenotypes. For instance, Celia is described as blue-eyed, but having a dark father; Jorge is blue-eyed (Garcia 31), while his mother and sister have “dark, freckled faces” (Garcia 41). Lourdes is dark while Felicia is clearly whiter, with dark hair and green eyes, and Pilar is white, with black hair (Garcia 137). Although I focus my discussion on Lourdes and Pilar, in my analysis I also refer to other characters, especially when discussing the presence of Santería and the implications of racism.

Despite the celebrated ethnic miscegenation present in Cuba, the nation is confronted with complex racial issues in the same way the Dominican Republic is, and these problems,

inherited from the past, remain unresolved. Leonardo Padura, a famous Cuban novelist, points out the significance of the “black problem” in the ethnic origin of the population, and the persistence of racism since colonial times, which according to him, was a factor that delayed Cuba’s independence from Spain, because of the fear that the blacks, having been exploited for three centuries, might “vindicate their rights” during an unstable political moment. Padura states that, “Cuban society was thus built with a strict code in which skin color placed human beings in certain social classes and even within varying degrees of humanity: Black, in many cases, was synonymous with beast” (The Root). Within the mixing that took place since the arrival of the first Spaniards, the blacks in Cuban society seemed to be relegated to the same low caste they were assigned in the Dominican Republic, and similarly, endured negrophobia. Although the novel focuses on the predicaments the women characters undergo, in diaspora and in Cuba, it also places emphasis, among other things, on the situation the scholars discuss above, in special, the undercurrent racism that is part of Cuba’s social context. One example shows how Celia’s misperception regarding Herminia’s father might be connected to racism. She expresses surprise when she talks to him for the first time, as the following quote evidences:

Afteward, Felicia took me to her best friend Herminia’s house. Her father, Salvador, is a *santería* priest, an unassuming, soft-spoken man, black as the blackest Africans. He surprised me by serving us tea and homemade cookies. I’m not sure what I expected, I’d heard so many frightful stories about him (Garcia 163).

Celia’s former view of Salvador had been influenced by the “many frightful stories” and her surprise regarding his kindness, soft voice, and his serving them tea show the significance of the stereotypes in the construction of images of Africans and African descendants. In the following passage, Celia reenacts these stereotypes concerning Salvador as she is afraid of the

celebrations for Changó. This event is even more significant because it occurs before she meets him : “she was wary of powers she didn’t understand. She locked her children in the house on December 4, the feast day of Changó, god of fire and lightening, and warned them that they’d be kidnapped and sacrificed to the black people’s god if they wandered the streets alone. For good measure, she forbade Felicia to visit her best friend, Herminia, whose father everyone denounced as a witch doctor” (Garcia 77). Celia’s fear of the mentioned celebration might be rooted in racism, which often associates blackness with savagery and witchery. On the other hand, there is also Herminia’s comments about Celia and Jorge’s behavior:

“Felicia’s parents were afraid of my father. He was a babalawo, a high priest of santería... The people in Santa Teresa del Mar told evil lies about my father. They said he used to rip the heads off goats with his teeth and fillet blue-eyed babies before dawn (Garcia 183-84). Through the myths and stereotypes constructed about the African descendants, the passage above supports what Padura affirms about the dehumanization of blacks in Cuban society.

*Dreaming in Cuban* comprehends the period between 1935 – starting with Celia’s letters to Gustavo – and 1980. Celia’s letters come to an end in 1959, when the revolution is eleven days old, and Pilar is born. Thus, the novel mingles real facts with fiction, showing part of Cuban life during the period Fulgencio Batista ruled, as well as during the onset of Castro’s revolution and its consolidation. Celia writes in her letter from September 11, 1956, that “[p]eople say that Batista had to pay a million dollars to become a member (of the Havana Yacht Club) because his skin is not light enough” (Garcia 207). Celia’s comment on the difficulty for Batista to enter the club demonstrates the deep prejudice against dark-skinned people in Cuban society.

Cuba also suffered invasions by the USA, and, similarly to the Dominican Republic, it went through a system of cultural control. Knight comments about that period stating that

“Cubans used U.S. currency, bought U.S. commodities, and sold virtually all of their products in the U.S. market. ... the income from sugar was augmented by a vigorous tourist business promoted by luxury hotels, gambling casinos, and brothels catering to every vice... For the majorities of Cubans in the 1950s, life was brutally miserable” (239). Celia records the relationship between the upper class – Rufino’s parents – and the US citizens in the island: “Dom Guillermo ... spoke the entire evening of the importance of maintaining good relations with the Americans and insisted that they are the key to our future” (Garcia 207). In this passage Garcia fictionalizes the extreme dependency and submission of Cubans to US’s culture.

The racial inequality which began in colonial times also persisted when Castro took control of the country. Carlos Moore states that “about 50 percent – of the Cubans – were of African descent. Racial segregation both in public and in private establishments was still pervasive” (15). Nevertheless, the problem remained untouched by Castro in the first months of his rule. Moore claims that although the black workers – rural and industrial – were the base of the regime, they remained voiceless, and feared Castro’s intentions concerning the race issue, which could marginalize them as it had happened in the past (16). When Castro decided to address the problem, he acknowledged that injustice and prejudice hindered the life of blacks in Cuba. He also considered the eradication of segregation to be one of the major goals of the revolutionary regime. However, he carefully avoided discussing the political and cultural implications of the racial question, explaining that discrimination in Cuba was limited to the workplace and to cultural and recreational facilities. Concerning discrimination at the workplace, he classified it as a crime, and the ones taking place in recreational places would be corrected by racial integration (Moore 19-20). Moore claims that Castro’s strategy of avoidance was consistent with the ignorance of the ethno-political and cultural implications of the Cuban system of white supremacy. He adds that, “Castro’s exclusive emphasis on the goal

of racial integration was entirely consistent with the Latin model of race relations” (21).

Castro’s speeches on the racial problem, affirms Moore,

reconfirmed two permanent features of his approach to race relations: a commitment to an integrationist stance steeped in white liberal paternalism and a firm refusal to allow the racial question to escape that framework ... In other words, the government was intent on banning discrimination based on race or color, while racism itself could remain a sort of discretionary ethical question. Implicit in this policy was that Cuba’s new white leadership tacitly condoned white supremacy but frowned on racial segregation (28).

In regard to Moore’s argument about Castro’s integrationist policy, Herminia, the voice that unveils the racial issues in the novel, describes the changes that occur after the revolution and the social results for the black population:

Things have gotten better under the revolution, that much I can say. In the old days, when voting time came, the politicians would tell us we were all the same, one happy family. Every day, though, it was another story. The whiter you were, the better off you were... There’s more respect now, ... and I supervise forty-two women. It’s not much, maybe, but it’s better than mopping floors or taking care of another woman’s children instead of own (Garcia 185).

As shown in the example above, despite the fact that white supremacy remains untouched by the revolutionary government, the integrationist measures bring some improvement to the poorest black population.

Herminia also mentions that “[t]here are white people who know how to act politely to blacks, but deep down you know they’re uncomfortable. They’re worse, more dangerous than those who speak their minds, because they don’t know what they’re capable of” (Garcia 184). Herminia’s comments portray the racism that, according to the scholars quoted in this chapter, is recurrent practice in the Caribbean and other countries in Latin and South Americas. However, Herminia’s words might reveal one of Moore’s claims that because of the extreme marginalization the descendants of African slaves had been subject to in Cuba, and their need to be truly accepted by society, “Black Cuba was seduced by Castro’s integrationist promises. Integration thus becomes a magic word” (42). Along the same line, Padura states that “Cubanness is mestizaje. Nonetheless, the old prejudices live on in the minds of many people, while the social system, with its egalitarian laws, hasn’t been able to liberate black people from the poorest margins of society” (The Root). Still, he points out that historians and sociologists claim that the “black problem” is still a vivid reality in Cuba, demanding a solution that has not been provided by “laws, decrees and official edicts that paternalistically (but are, deep down, racist) try to stipulate ethnic representation in certain affairs of state, government and the Communist party” (The Root). In Garcia’s novel, the revolution, its successes and failures, is the background for the portrayal of the women characters and so is the “black problem” mentioned by Padura. Johnson also claims that Castro “encouraged the promotion of Afro-Cuban culture, music, language, and religion... (and) was even initiated as a Santero (*babalawo*) in the Santeria religion” (63). By doing that he “was able to win their (African descendants) support by elevating their status in a society that had previously turned a blind eye to their suffering” (63). It is interesting to observe that Garcia also focuses on Santeria as a way of highlighting the significant participation of the African element in Cuba’s life, a topic that I approach in the next section.

### 3.2.1 Ethnicity, Race, and Racism: Lourdes and Pilar

The analysis of the characterization of Lourdes and Pilar, in light of the issues of ethnicity and race, and the consequences of racism, is relevant because their diasporic movement to the US is a key element in the construction of their subjectivities. As mentioned before, as a member of the elite class, Lourdes moves to the US in a quite comfortable condition. At the beginning, she does not see her flight as immigration, rather, she considers herself to be an exile, as she hopes to return to Cuba after the US overthrows Castro. However, as this situation never takes place, she resigns to her new status. Maria Cristina Garcia, in “Refugees or Economic Immigrants?,” argues that since the first waves of immigration to the US, Cubans, unlike other immigrants from the Caribbean, Central and South America, have enjoyed a privileged status that has helped them to face life in their host land. She says that “[t]he fact that the United States had maintained a strong political, military, and economic presence on the island in the decades prior to the Castro revolution made accommodation to the US somewhat easier for the Cubans, especially those who had consistent contact with American institutions on the island” (482). Equally important, after the failure of the invasion of Bay of Pigs – an attempt to invade Cuba in 1961 by Cuban exiles, with the help of the US government (JFK Presidential Library) – there was an increase in the financial support for Cuban exiles, providing “funding for resettlement, monthly relief checks, health services, job (re)training, adult educational opportunities, foster care for unaccompanied children, aid to public schools, and surplus food distribution” (M.C. Garcia 482). As a result of such policy, the overall condition of Cubans *émigrés* was much more comfortable than that encountered by immigrants of other parts of the Caribbean. Lourdes fits this condition and exhibits the profile the US foreign policy prioritized, considering that since childhood she is exposed to US cultural values, through Jorge’s guidance, and later, as



an adult, when she becomes part of Rufino's family, which had a key role in sustaining the American presence in Cuba. Another relevant element for Lourdes's adaptation to US society is the hatred she nurtures towards communism. Additionally, she is a businesswoman, owning two bakeries in Brooklyn. All these points provide an easier process of adaptation for Lourdes.

While in the US Lourdes's behavior is ambiguous concerning her connection to her roots, because while she claims that "[s]he wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, ... which Lourdes claims never possessed her" (Garcia 73), she gathers with other Cubans, plotting to overthrow Castro while smoking Cuban cigars. She is closely linked to the former status she enjoyed as a land proprietor and boss, and she hopes to have them back one day. Lourdes is described as "dark," although there are no other details regarding her physical traits. In the novel this fact seems to be irrelevant for Lourdes being either in Cuba or in the US, as in a way, it points to the relation between ethnic identity and the caste system instituted by the Spaniards in the Caribbean – as demonstrated by Candelario – which "raises" people of dark complexion to higher castes because of their high economic status, thus ignoring the skin tone. Her comfortable economic situation also helps her not to be discriminated in the US, despite her "darkness." Lourdes's rejection of Cuba is more the result of the predicaments she suffered with Castro's ascent to power – already discussed in the previous chapters – than an abandonment of her Cubanness. Her dancing the congas with Ivanito – when she is back in Cuba – unveils her Cubanness and her attachment to the roots which had been hidden under her trauma, as the following quote shows: "Her body remembered what her mind had forgotten... Lourdes exaggerated her steps, flawless and lilting, teasing the rhythm seductively. She held the notes in her hips and her thighs, in the graceful arch of her back" (Garcia 224).

Lourdes's process of subjectivity construction is deeply marked by a sense of superiority toward others, learned from Jorge, especially toward those from the lower classes, the so-called idealists – like Celia, Felicia, and Pilar –, her employees and other immigrants. Concerning the latter, Lourdes ignores the hardships and predicaments they go through and blames them for what she sees as incompetence, lack of initiative and poverty. Besides, she oppresses her immigrant employees as the following passage, narrated through Pilar's viewpoint, shows:

Mom goes through her employees like those pecan sticky buns she eats. Nobody ever lasts more than a day or two. She hires the real downs-and-outs, immigrants from Russia or Pakistan, people who don't speak any English, figuring she can get them cheap. ... Mom thinks they're all out to steal from her so she rifles through their coats and shopping bags when they're working (Garcia 32).

As Lourdes buys her second bakery, Jorge who is already dead but is described as paying her constant visits, advises her to paint her name on the front: “[p]ut your name on the sign, too, *hija*, so they know what we Cubans are up to, that we're not all Puerto Ricans”(Garcia 170). It seems that Jorge wants Lourdes to make it clear for everybody who might see the sign that there is a significant difference between Cubans and Puerto Ricans, although it is not clear in the novel what this difference might be. For this reason, it may be said that Jorge's advice might bear a racist view of Puerto Ricans (Garcia 170). Lourdes feels sorry for the Jews moving out of Brooklyn and laments the invasion of the neighborhood by other immigrants: ‘I don't make up the statistics,’ she tells Pilar. ‘I don't color the faces down at the precinct.’ Black faces, Puerto Rican faces. ... Lourdes prefers to confront reality – the brownstones converted to tenements in a matter of months, the garbage in the streets, the jaundice-eyed men staring vacantly from the stoops. Even Pilar couldn't denounce her for

being a hypocrite” (Garcia 128). As the quotes show, Lourdes relates the decay of the neighborhood to the presence of the “Black, (and) Puerto Rican faces. She seems to forget that Cubans are much better off because of the US support, which other immigrants do not have. Lourdes’s attitudes are emblematic of those from the racist Cuban elite in pre-revolutionary times – in its various shades. After the Revolution, this elite is stripped from its wealth – acquired through the coerced or cheap labor of African descendants – and leaves the country, carrying the racist system along.

Unlike her mother, Pilar searches for her own identification, for her ethnic roots, and she believes that Cuba might offer her an answer both her parents and the US cannot provide. She manages to keep connected to Cuba through her telepathic conversations with Celia and her memories, as she points out: “I was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that’s happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations” (Garcia 26). In Davis’s view, mentioned in “Back to the Future,” “Pilar’s search is ultimately for roots and connectedness, which she cannot achieve through her mother. Celia and Cuba become, therefore, the idealized objects of personal fulfillment and stability.” Clinging to her memories of Cuba, Pilar chooses not to be assimilated into US culture and she prefers to relate to other immigrants, as is the case of her boyfriends: Max, of Mexican descent, and Ruben, a Peruvian. She chooses Spanish as the language of love, although the language does not come to her as naturally as she wishes: “We speak Spanish when we make love. English seems an impossible language for intimacy” (Garcia 180).

Pilar refuses to mistreat her mother’s employees, and rejects her mother’s views on communism, which she feels are biased. Additionally, she is inclined to identify with the dreamers’ side of the family: Celia and Felicia, through her love of language, music and art. In all the years she lives in the US Pilar wishes to discover where she really belongs. The search comes to an end when she returns to Cuba. For her the sense of connectedness implies

a definition of what her future might be. In my view, this search is fundamental because it is impossible to live in the present or think about the future without the roots of the past. The sense of belonging and rootedness that Pilar craves for is one aspect of her subjectivity which needs to be fulfilled and experienced so that she may understand her subjectivity formation more clearly

### **3.2.2 Santería and Cuba: Felicia, Pilar and Herminia**

As I have said before, Pilar's sense of self finds an answer in her quest as she enters a botanica in New York and is identified as a daughter of Changó. Pilar changes after meeting the santero and then decides to return to Cuba, taking Lourdes along. In the chapter entitled "God's Will," Pilar searches for Herminia's version of Felicia's history because she needs to understand what happened to her aunt. Felicia and Herminia are also daughters of Changó and the former is even initiated in the rituals of the religion before her death. Herminia greets Pilar as if she is part of her family saying: "*Bienvenida, hija*" (Garcia 232). The presence of Santería is relevant throughout the novel, mainly through Felicia's adherence to it, followed by Pilar's in the end of the novel. The presence of cultural elements associated with the characters' African descent shows their importance in Cuban culture and society that had in a certain way been obliterated since the beginning of the Spanish conquest. Regarding this focus in the novel, Kevane, in *Latino Literature* claims that: "With that voice, Garcia is able to incorporate and highlight some of the racial issues that characterize Cuba, racial issues many times ignored or dismissed by Cubans as nonexistent." By uniting the three women under the African religion, Garcia brings to the fore the importance of the Africans as components of Cuban society and symbolically points out Cuban people's strong connection to their African roots. By doing that, Garcia, according to Johnson, "is clearly rejecting the

racial attitudes of the upper- and middle-class Spanish of Cuba, as represented by Lourdes” (79). I agree with Johnson’s argument and would add that the opposition between US values – represented by Lourdes – and Cuba ones – portrayed by Pilar – is destabilized in favor of the Cuban cultural traits with which Pilar associates herself, although she decides not to stay in Cuba. Her decision comes from the understanding that it would be impossible for her to live under the prohibitions of Castro’s regime. However, her roots with her motherland are definitely settled through her embrace of Santeria and her legacy as the narrator of the family’s history.

Equally important is Herminia’s account of Felicia’s life in her last years. Herminia points out that “Felicia is the only person I’ve known who didn’t see color” (Garcia 184). This statement is fundamental in our understanding of Felicia’s role in exposing the racism that permeates Cuban life, as she embraces the religion and befriends Herminia, despite her family’s opposition. Differently from her family members, who remain fearful and distrustful of Herminia’s practice of African cults, Felicia defends her from racist manifestations when they were children. As Herminia herself narrates: “The other children shunned me and called me *bruja*. They made fun of my hair, oiled and plaited in neat rows, and of my skin, black as my father’s. But Felicia defended me. I’ll always be grateful to her for that” (Garcia 184). Moreover, Felicia transgresses the established racial limits set by her family and society once more as she marries Hugo, an African descendant. Contrary to the practice of light-skinned people, Felicia, in society’s view “marries down.” Herminia unveils the transgressive character of Felicia as she says, “Felicia stayed on the fringe of life because it was free of everyday malice. It was more dignified there” (Garcia 184). Added to the other predicaments she suffers – discussed in the previous chapter – Felicia eventually seems to be punished with death for her liminal behavior.

As discussed above, both novels approach the themes of ethnicity and race in similar ways, although there are differences concerning the characters' experiences of racism. The countries from which the characters come from also share several similarities, especially in regard to the racist system instituted by the Spaniards during slavery and carried on afterwards. In the Dominican Republic, the whitening discourse shaped its citizens' understanding of race, imposing unreal categorizations that cannot account for the country's high level of miscegenation. In Cuba, despite the intense miscegenation between Europeans and blacks, the latter also live under the stigma of racism. The Castro revolution brought forth an integrationist policy that resulted in some economic and social progress to the African descendants, but the white supremacist system underlying Cuban society remains untouched.

In *Geographies of Home*, Iliana and Marina, in different ways, adhere to their ethnic roots while they live in the US. Marina, however, clings to her identification as a Dominican in an attempt to avoid the binary categorization deriving from the US one-drop rule. Iliana, in contrast, understands that it is impossible to separate her heritage from her race as both are part of her identity. In this way she embraces her blackness, despite the racism she undergoes in her host land and the subsequent trauma resulting from it. Marina, however, is unable to overcome her hatred of blackness, and consequently, of herself. Her inability to accept her ethnic and racial heritage reveals a conflict with her desire to fit in the white-dominated society in the US, and therefore, to be seen as white. This inability leads to a racial trauma, a mental breakdown, and eventually to madness.

*Dreaming in Cuban* shows in the division of the del Pino family the split that occurs in Cuba after Castro takes control of the country. Lourdes represents the racist elite that had ruled the country since the onset of Spanish colonization, and that lived and amassed fortunes by exploiting the slave labor, and later the cheap labor of African descendants. As an elite immigrant in the US, Lourdes reenacts this same oppression over other immigrants, thus

perpetuating a racist attitude towards those labeled as “others”. Pilar, Felicia and Herminia, on the other hand, unveil Cuba’s racist system and fight it by embracing their African cultural heritage through their involvement with Santería. Added to that, in Felicia’s case, she also marries a black man. Through these women, Garcia touches on the untouchable: Cuban racism.

Both authors choose different ways to treat racism: Pérez, overtly, yelling the pain and traumas that result from it; Garcia, subtly, insinuating its presence and unveiling its hidden agenda. In their differences, the novels bring to light the racial issue faced or enforced by immigrants from the Caribbean in the US. At the same time, they interrogate the so-called myth of “racial equality” that is characteristic of the Caribbean, proving that racism stems from within these societies and might take new forms in diaspora when confronted with the US white supremacy. Both authors, as I tried to demonstrate, explore the ways the understanding of ethnic and racial configurations shape the women characters’ subjectivities and the way racism might result in traumas.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I meant to demonstrate my hypothesis that the novels *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Geographies of Home* both focus on women characters that go through different forms of trauma. My investigation came to be of wide scope because it encompasses three sub-claims. In the first, I try to establish the argument that the diasporic movements the women characters undergo are major issues in both novels, as they are the cause of traumatic events for Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina and Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, and for Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*. As for Lourdes, diaspora comes to be the consequence of a prior trauma. Therefore, the diasporic movements these characters go through are related to the traumas they manifest, either as cause or as consequence. These traumas cause fragmentation in their subjectivities and result in some sort of mental disorders for Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina and Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, and for Lourdes in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

My investigation on trauma demonstrated that the characters' traumatic experiences could not be explained exclusively by the definition of trauma often discussed in trauma studies, that is, the one which came to be defined as Post Traumatic Stress Disease (PTSD). This definition considers trauma as a "psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience" and "involves either a serious threat to one's life or physical integrity" (The Circumcision Reference Library). There has been much controversy about this first definition, mainly because of the difficulty in establishing what "the range of unusual human experience" is. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) includes rape as one of the forms in which the PTSD manifests in individuals. It seemed plausible to me, then, to analyze Marina's, Iliana's and Lourdes's rapes – the first one, alleged – under such concept. Based on the symptoms described in trauma studies and on the analysis of the narratives I demonstrate that Iliana and Lourdes, in different levels, are traumatized by the rapes they suffer. I show as well that, although there is no textual,



evidence of Marina's alleged rape, the episode is real enough for her and because of that she also presents symptoms described in studies related to rape trauma. The symptoms these characters present include numbing, denial, recurrent flashbacks, olfactory sensations, hyper sexuality, overeating, and hallucinations.

Nevertheless, it is clear on both narratives that the characters Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina, Iliana, Lourdes and Pilar, manifest dysfunctional behaviors that result from a fragmentation in their subjectivities as well, although their behavior cannot be included in the PTSD definition of trauma. Such traumas come also to be the result of the diasporas they go through. For the characters analyzed here these traumas result in painful and disturbing consequences. Scholars such as Kaplan, Brown, Barret, Luhrman and Forter have investigated this other sort of trauma. And yet, there has not been consensus in terms of its categorization, nevertheless all these authors agree that there are events which happen in the course of normal life such as abandonment, bereavement, sexual oppression, and racism, that are considered "chronic" and "social traumas" (Forter 260). These traumas, despite their diverse manifestations, leave marks on the self as well, and might often lead to mental disorders. Focusing on this concept it was possible for me to analyze the traumas Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina, Iliana, and Pilar go through in their dislocation to the US. For these women, the feeling of homelessness and estrangement diaspora brings forth causes fragmentation in their subjectivities, and for Rebecca and Marina they result in mental disorder. As for Aurelia, she engages in a process of depression shortly after her arrival in the US but overcomes it for her children's sake. Rebecca is bitterly disappointed by not having accomplished the "American dream" and because she experiences extreme poverty. Marina exhibits the same deep disappointment with the course her life takes as well. Iliana also experiences a feeling of displacement in her host land as well as inside her own home. She feels misplaced because she has no roots, neither in the US nor in the Dominican Republic. Regarding Pilar, her

trauma is related to the separation from her grandmother and from Cuba and to her parents' exile in the US. Although her trauma does not end up in any mental disorder, Pilar, similarly to Iliana, experiences a feeling of dislocation within the US social cultural context, and within her family and she also searches for a sense of belonging. By analyzing the situations of estrangement, social clash, poverty, misplacement and of rupture with the cultural roots of their homelands, I show that these characters are traumatized due to the process of dislocation from their homelands to the US.

In my second sub-claim I investigate the traumas related to the women's characters life stories and the codes of behavior they are expected to fulfill in a patriarchal society. Thus I analyze the gendering of trauma in both narratives as one of the major issues addressed in the novels. Both Pérez and Garcia approach the gender relations in diaspora with a critical look, especially in what concerns the situations into which these women are trapped and the ways they try to deal with them. Relying on Felman's statement about the presence of trauma in every woman's life, I demonstrate that Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina, and Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, present traumas which have a close connection with their past life, with their sexual oppression, with the social-political context that prevailed in the Dominican Republic and with the family's history. Aurelia is traumatized by her brother's suicide and this event in a way leads her to submit to Papito's will. Rebecca and Marina have difficulties in dealing with issues of individuation. They both rely on others – especially on men – to assert their subjectivities. Marina suffers abandonment when her parents dislocate to the US and are not able to take all their children with them. Although she joins the family later, she displays a problematic sense of inferiority because of that while Rebecca seems to cling to victimization to justify the violence she undergoes in the hands of Pasión. I demonstrate that Rebecca complies with her violent and abusive husband because she cannot fully exercise her sexuality in the context of her marriage. Marina, on the other hand, craves for marriage in

order to exercise it. As they are Adventist, religion reinforces patriarchy within the family's dynamics. I show that these women's behavior can be explained by the demands of patriarchy that frames women in the stereotypical roles of wives and mothers. These roles are highly influenced by specific political, social and ideological connotations during Trujillo's time, and are also responsible for shaping the process of subjectivity construction for both women

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, my investigation shows that the abandonment Celia undergoes by her mother, and later by her Spanish lover, contributes to her abandonment of Lourdes, and accounts for her continuous depression and behavior towards her daughter, and to a lesser degree, towards Felicia. Lourdes, on the other hand, cannot overcome Celia's abandonment and clings to an obsessive and selfish relationship with her father, Jorge. Added to that, Lourdes cannot forget the miscarriage she suffers and the loss of her social status after Castro's government is instated. Although she claims she is assimilated in the US, Lourdes is unable to forget these predicaments and they add to the memories of her rape, thus aggravating her traumas.

My analysis also demonstrates that Felicia is marked by abandonment as well, both by her father's and Lourdes's, and to some extent, by Celia's, who is immersed in her passions, first with the Spaniard Gustavo, and later, with Castro. Similarly to Rebecca and Marina, Felicia also relies on others to assert her subjectivity – first on Hugo, later on the other two husbands. Felicia is abused, beaten, and contaminated by Hugo with syphilis. Regarding Pilar, her separation from Celia in her early infancy is also traumatic and can be accounted for her sense of misplacement and loneliness. The socio-political context in Cuba is crucial in shaping these women's subjectivities and adding to their traumas. For Celia and Felicia, the patriarchal codes of pre and post-revolutionary Cuba are fundamental in entrapping both women. Lourdes, on the other hand, chooses to enforce patriarchal laws and codes of behavior. Thus, through the analysis of the characters' experiences I validate my claim that

these characters suffer traumas of different sorts which result from their family and psychic histories, the social contexts they are inserted into, and the oppression they suffer under patriarchy.

Finally, in my last sub-claim I argue that the concepts of ethnicity and race, added to a racist environment and context imbricate in the process of subjectivity construction and fragmentation for the characters Iliana, Marina, Lourdes and Pilar. Additionally, I claim that in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Santeria is an element through which Garcia exposes Cuba's racist system and, at the same time, serves to show the contribution of the Africans to Cuba's development as a nation. I demonstrate that for Iliana and Marina the double categorization as immigrant and black is complicated in that it prevents both women from being considered ethnic members of US's society. The one-drop rule defines them as blacks in the US, a characterization that does not match the way they were taught to view themselves in the Dominican Republic, and that results in trauma. The racism they suffer is also traumatic for both sisters, but for Marina it is far more complex because of her psychic history, the discourse of racial superiority into which she is entrapped, and her internalized racism. All these experiences lead Marina to madness. Iliana, on the other hand, manages to escape from mental deterioration because of her resiliency and strong sense of identification with her African heritage.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Santeria comes as the element that unites Felicia, Herminia and Pilar. These women find their way to the religion at different moments, and in Pilar's case it is fundamental in opening a path for her understanding of herself as a Cuban-American, for the comprehension that she could find another geographical place to be and become a member of the American society, and yet still be *Dreaming in Cuban*.

As for Felicia, she transgresses not only Cuba's social and cultural divide because she is white and adheres to a religion that is mostly practiced by African descendants in Cuba but

also the white supremacist system by marrying Hugo, who is of African origin. Herminia is the African voice that tells Pilar the events related to Felicia, but she also voices the oppression African descendants undergo in Cuba. My analysis of their experiences unveils the subtle relationship Garcia draws between Santeria, racism, and the African contribution to Cuba's sense of nationality. At this point another similarity between both novels is revealed as in *Dreaming in Cuban* Santeria recovers this tradition, and in *Geographies of Home* Aurelia and Iliana embrace their tradition as well – which is also African. Both women find out that their subjectivities are constructed in the various *Geographies of Home*.

Through the investigation carried out here, my claim that the women characters in both novels suffer different sorts of trauma is validated. Pérez's and Garcia's novels especially foreground the discussion of traumatic experiences for women characters under different aspects. The patriarchal configuration of their societies, the movements of dislocation, the rapes, the social and political contexts, the abandonments, the family problems in both novels all lead to an understanding of the traumas these women suffer. Both authors also succeed in demonstrating that trauma might often result in several mental disorders. Trauma and the many consequences it brings to women characters are discussed in both novels, unveiling problems that are not frequently tackled in trauma studies. I believe my research contributes for a better understanding of the gendering of trauma in the contexts discussed in both novels. It also brings a contribution for trauma studies in contemporary women's writings as I provide a thorough comparison between the novels, focusing on trauma as a multilayered and complex phenomenon. Referring back to the epigraph in the beginning of this thesis, women may be imprisoned either as princesses, as in the case of Lourdes, pampered by Jorge and by a wealthy condition after she gets married to Rufino; or as slaves, as in the case of Marina, Rebecca and Felicia who are enslaved by oppression derived from patriarchal codes of behavior, family history and sexual oppression. However, if a woman

decides to have agency, and takes control of her own destiny, as Aurelia, Iliana and Pilar do, they are able to build their subjectivity and identifications accordingly and to become free. In sum, women may be entrapped in the roles assigned to them, but they may also choose to find the way out for the construction of their own selves.

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