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Compositions in Black and Brown: Manifestations of Afro-Latinity in U.S. Black Latino/a Literary Discourse

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Janelle Chevon Coleman entitled "Compositions in Black and Brown: Manifestations of Afro-Latinity in U.S. Black Latino/a Literary Discourse." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Modern Foreign Languages.

Dawn A. Duke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Compositions in Black and Brown: Manifestations of Afro-Latinity in U.S. Black Latino/a
Literary Discourse

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Janelle Chevon Coleman
May 2014

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DEDICATION

To my Heavenly Father and my Lord Jesus Christ

To my loving mother, Ms. Janet Houston

To my late grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Claude L. and Olivet F. Houston

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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of the literature by Afro-Latino writers Junot Díaz, Evelio Grillo, Piri Thomas and Loida Maritza Pérez, my dissertation shows how the multifaceted nature of Afro-Latino/a identity and culture is reflected in the works of three novels written by Spanish-speaking authors who self-identify as Afro-Caribbean Americans. I use criticism from such scholars as Juan Flores, Miriam Jiménez, and Jorge Gracia to show that U.S. Afro-Latinity is not representative of an essence, but rather of a set of common manifestations resulting from conflicting concepts of race and ethnicity. I assert that U.S. Black Latinos not only possess a unique history and culture that has its roots in both Latin American and African cultures, but also that they are currently constructing their own definition of selfhood that transcends the fixed racial labels that American society has created over time.

In Chapter One, I discuss the historical realities that have created the concepts of race in both the United States and in Latin America. Chapter Two addresses Junot Díaz's use of language play as a means to resist colonialist discourse about race in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). In Chapter Three, I look at how Evelio Grillo and Piri Thomas' appropriations of blackness in their autobiographies *Black Cuban*, *Black American* (2000) and *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) demonstrate a tendency toward exclusion of those not belonging. This is evident in both authors' overt rejection of White supremacy. Finally, in Chapter Four, I discuss the concept of home in *Geographies of Home* (2000) by Loida Maritza Pérez. Through an analysis of the main female characters of the novel, I assert that Afro-Latina women, by virtue of their racial heritages and the implications of their gender, often struggle to forge their own identity due to the tension between the societal expectations of their homelands in Latin America and the societal expectations of Black women in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION – WRITING ON THE MARGINS: RECONCEPTUALIZING RACE IN U.S. AFRO-LATINO/A LITERARY DISCOURSE

“no, not yet, no, not yet / i will not proclaim myself, / a total child of any land, / i’m still in the commonwealth / stage of my life, wondering / what to decide, what to conclude, / what to declare myself./ i’m still in the commonwealth / stage of my life, not knowing / which ideology to select. / i’m still in the commonwealth / stage of my life, all of us / caught in a web of suspension, / light-years away from the indians’ / peaceful enclaves.”

--“commonwealth” by Tato Laviera, Afro-Puerto Rican poet¹

Problem

My project, through an analysis of the works *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Geographies of Home*, *Black Cuban*, *Black American* and *Down These Mean Streets* by Afro-Hispanic and Afro-Latino writers Junot Díaz, Loida Maritza Pérez, Evelio Grillo and Piri Thomas respectively will show that Afro-Latino identity is symbolic of a “third consciousness” that represents a unique and identifiable position visible through writing.² I also contend that, due to the emphasis on social justice and the critique of U.S. relations with Latin America, the Afro-Latino literary legacy is derived from the relations between African American and Afro-Latin American writers, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance. Since the literary production of

¹ Laviera, Tato. *AmeRícan*. Houston, TX: Arte Público, 2003: 80.

² The term “Afro-Latino” is used here to refer to individuals of African descent who have Latin American roots. It is also used to refer to Afro-Descendants with Caribbean and Latin American origins living in the United States. Established at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in 2001, the term “has surfaced as a way to signal racial, cultural, and socioeconomic contradictions with the overly vague idea of Latin@” (Flores and Jiménez 2). Still, according to *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, the term is not universally accepted, and there has been very little consensus about its meaning (1). Further complicating this issue are the fluctuating perceptions of identities in general within different social and cultural contexts. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the terms *Afro-Latino*, *Afro-Hispanic American*, and *Black Latino* interchangeably to refer to individuals with African ancestry with Latin American currently living in the United States. The term *Afro-Latinity*, therefore, will describe the characteristics and issues related to those identified specifically as *Afro-Latino*. The titles *Afro-Latin Americans*, *Black Latin Americans*, and *Afro-Hispanics* will be utilized to describe Afro-Descendants with Latin American roots living in Mexico, Central and South America, and in the Caribbean so as to avoid confusion. The terms *Black* and *African American* will also be used interchangeably to refer to Afro-Descendants born in the United States without Latin American ancestry.

Afro-Latinos largely consists of works written by Caribbean authors (Luis, “Afro-Latino/a Literature” 34), I have chosen to analyze works by authors of Dominican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican ancestry. While these writers create Afro-Latino characters that are aware of their Latin American roots, they are also pressured to assimilate to the norms established by American society. Further complicating this process is their physical blackness; it is this characteristic that not only makes them susceptible to racial discrimination by a dominant power group, but also by those they see as part of their own culture group.³ I argue that the tension between three elements—the need to assimilate to U.S. culture, the connection to Latin American roots, and isolation as a result of racism—greatly affects the identity formations of Afro-Latinos in the U.S., and distinguishes them from the African Americans or Latin Americans. This singularity comes forth in the form of distinct linguistic patterns, the search for a home space, and in the sense of isolation that characterizes the beginning stages of the Afro-Latino’s self-actualization. In my dissertation, I refer to the latter as the impostor complex—the sense of aloneness that occurs when one who is phenotypically different is treated as an imposter within what he or she considers his or her culture group.

The ideologies imposed upon Latin America due to its colonization by both Europe and the United States have engendered an ongoing process of identification and re-identification that continues into the 21st century (Garcés 1). Afro-Descendant writers in Latin America have added to this process by incorporating themselves into the historical and cultural discourses of their countries. In raising awareness of the African presence in Latin America, these writers have created, to use the term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” a

³ What is defined as a “dominant power group” may vary among cultural and social contexts; however, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants have historically served as the most influential group in the United States (Kendall et. al. 281). An Afro-Latino’s culture group may best be described as his or her nationality (i.e., Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, etc.).

“double-consciousness” (2) that pays homage to both their national identities and their African heritage. This notion of multiple identities is equally manifested in Afro-Latin Americans who, through the centuries, have migrated to the United States, where race and ethnicity are integral components of self-identification. Created in part by the politically charged events of Civil Rights Movement, this system of racial and ethnic identification is problematic for Afro-Latino/a writers in the U.S. who neither identify completely with African Americans nor with white Latinos.

Afro-Latinos in the U.S., much like African Americans, have struggled to forge a sense of identity in a nation in which they are often misunderstood. Racial identity is often tied to economic and social status in Latin America. However, in the United States, the concept of race is based on a black-white dichotomy that is linked to phenotype. This distinction causes problems for objectified Afro-Latinos, who, upon arriving to this country, experience a tension between their concept of race and identity, and the socially established labels forced upon them as a result of the system of racial labeling in America. Black Latinos have had a presence in the Americas and in the United States even as early as the 1500s (McKnight and Garofalo ix); however, their culture and identity formation have only been a topic of study in the recent years. Although the black-white dichotomy still exists to some extent today, there are several Afro-Latinos who reject this norm, preferring instead to be called “multiracial.” This has been problematic for various Latino and African American organizations that, fearful of losing support and influence, claim that the term is confusing and misleading (Lobban 14). The category “multiracial” skews the rigid definitions of racial identity that Americans currently hold, and eliminates phenotype as a key determinant of a person’s ethnicity. Nevertheless, the question of immigration and international policies, as well as the growth of the Latino

community, have forced scholars, government officials and social activists to re-examine current racial classifications. In light of these social changes, Afro-Latinos have carved out the space to redefine themselves in their own words, whether through literature or social activism. The multifaceted nature of their identities, as well as the tension between two strikingly different views of racial classification have led to a unique creation—a new identity that, while it possesses elements of African, Latin American, and American culture, is also distinctly visible in Afro-Latino literature.

A relatively new area of interest among literary scholars and critics, Afro-Latino literature has traditionally been defined as either a subset of African American or Latino literature. This categorization illustrates the effort on the part of scholars of Black and Latino literature to keep African American and Latino literary traditions separate (Mills 112). In recent years, however, several researchers and Afro-Latino writers such as William Luis, Miguel Algarín, Gayl Jones, Juan Flores, and Miriam Jiménez have challenged traditional ethnic categorizations in literature to underscore the existence of cross-cultural interactions between different ethnic groups. The acknowledgement of a specifically Afro-Latino literature allows for the breaking down of “false barriers between literary and cultural groups in order to better understand the complex relationships among ethnic groups in the United States” (Mills 112), and thereby creates space for the reconfiguration of currently held inaccurate perceptions of ethnic identities. One of the aims of this study is to add to the ongoing discussion of Afro-Latinity and its role in the re-evaluation of fixed notions of identity, ethnicity, and race by examining issues, concerns and perceptions experienced by members of the Afro-Latino community. While there have been several studies in the last thirty years on Afro-Latin Americans and their literature, only a small number of these works actually deal with the identity formation and literature of

Afro-Latinos in the United States (Mills 127)⁴. The goal of this study is to not only show the existence of an Afro-Latino/a literary discourse, but also to demonstrate that its singularity is the direct result of interactions and tensions between aspects of African American, United States, and Latin American cultures.

Justification of Topic

Afro-Latinos, due to their mixed heritage, experience racism on a different level from perhaps those of African American or of Latin-American descent. They not only face discrimination by Whites, but they are also marginalized within the Latino community. One of the objectives of this dissertation is to promote understanding of Afro-Latinity and its construction in a US context. Though there have been several studies on this very topic (Suzanne Oboler, Anani Dzidzienyo, Juan Flores, and Silvio Torres-Saillant), my dissertation will look Afro-Latinity through the lens of literary texts composed by writers who identify themselves as Afro-Latinos. This study will demonstrate that Afro-Latinos not only have a unique culture, literature and history, but that they also, due to the clash between the different perspectives of race in Latin America and the United States, possess a distinct identity.

Suzanne Oboler and Anani Dzidzienyo propose that “a radical reassessment of the problems of racism, discrimination and coalition building between African Americans and Latinos in U.S. society is also increasingly essential in light of heightened population movement across the hemisphere in the current context of globalization” (21). The cultural exchanges between African Americans and the Latino community have greatly enriched American culture;

⁴ See *Black in Latin America* (2011) by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Image in Latin American Literature* (1976), *Black Literature and Humanism* (2008), and *Black Writers in the Hispanic Canon* (1997) by Richard Jackson, *Poesía afroantillana y negrista* (1976) by Jorge Luis Morales, *Blacks in Hispanic Literature* (1977) and *Daughters of the Diaspora* (2003) by Miriam DeCosta-Willis, among others.

jazz music, the Civil Rights Movement, and hip-hop are all cultural products of the interactions of these communities. However, the relationship between these two groups is strained due to the influx of Latin-American immigrants and an overall lack of political power and educational and economic resources. A study about Afro-Latinos and their relationship to both cultures may serve to bridge this gap in showing that African Americans and Latinos do share a common heritage and a common history. Both groups have links to the African Diaspora, and their collaboration with one another has helped to construct and advance American society.

Finally, as Oboler and Dzidzienyo note in their introduction to *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, there is a lack of available texts “focusing specifically on the contemporary experience of Blacks, Latinas/so, and Afro-Latin Americans in the hemisphere. . .[and] most texts on blackness in the Americas tend to focus exclusively either on slavery or on the immediate post-abolition era” (21). While the latter is crucial to the understanding of the modern experiences of these groups, it is important to recognize that these cultures have evolved since slavery and continue to do so over time. Furthermore, not all Latinos and Latin-Americans of African descent were slaves. Though slavery has had a lasting impact on the identities of the Black Latin-American, as well as the Afro-Latino, it is a disservice to each group and to their contributions to their respective societies to simply view them as disenfranchised victims. One of the goals of this dissertation, while underscoring the effects of slavery on the Latin American and American perspectives on blackness, is to highlight the cultural contributions of Afro-Latinos. This is of great importance because, apart from the areas of sports and music, Afro-Latinos have received very little representation in media. As the Cuban author Evelio Grillo remarks in his autobiography *Black Cuban, Black American*, “No photographs, prints, or posters of heroic black Cubans graced our wall to teach us about our heritage” (41). By recognizing the existence of an

Afro-Latino experience in a U.S. context, this dissertation will challenge limited, erroneous perceptions of Latinity and blackness in order to reframe traditional perceptions of race, ethnicity and identity.

Historical Context of the Present Study

To better understand the complexities inherent in Afro-Latino literature, and the various cultures that have contributed to its creation, it is necessary to situate it within a larger historical context. Gazing backwards on the topic of historical literary construction of black literary voicing, it becomes possible to observe what are ideological shifts in terms of types of discourse. These periods overlap due to the changing political and social climates of Latin America. The first shift is observed in the anti-slavery novels of the 19th Century in Cuba. Although the Black figure makes an appearance in Hispanic literature as early as the Colonial period in Latin America with such poems as “Espejo de paciencia” (1608) by Silvestre de Balboa (Cuba), “Remedios para ser lo que quisieres” (1690) by Juan de Caviedes (Peru), and “Asunción” (1676) by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Mexico) among others, the questioning of the Black individual’s place in Latin American society began in the 19th Century with the Romantic Movement, a period characterized by turbulence and political unrest as a result of the Wars for Independence. The emphasis in this period was to define the Latin American experience, or as literary critic Mónica Mansour points out, “...provoca[r] el nacimiento ‘oficial’ del nacionalismo, en particular, y de un latinoamericanismo, en general, sentimientos necesarios para la consumación de la independencia⁵ (76).” For this reason, the Romantic writers focused primarily on the themes of freedom and the exotic; the poets of this period sought to not only distinguish the

⁵ “...to provoke the ‘official’ birth of nationalism, in particular, and of a Latin Americanism, in general, feelings necessary for the consummation of independence.”

newly forming nations from the rest of the world, but also to clearly define and describe specifically *lo americano*. Part of the process of determining who or what would be considered *americano* involved a restructuring of History (incorporating Latin American history within a greater world history), and an exploration and reevaluation of institutions previously established by the imposed colonial system. One of these institutions, slavery, inevitably became a serious issue in this period as intellectuals and writers questioned the validity of the establishment in both economic and social terms. In Cuba, for instance, slavery was seen as both vital to the economy and necessary for the maintenance of social order. On the one hand, slave labor helped to make Cuba the biggest sugar exporter in the world (Gates 180); however, it also allowed the island nation—like many other Latin American nations in this period—to control the booming Black population. According to Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Blacks (both enslaved and free) made up about sixty percent of the Cuban population during the 18th century (122). The reality of a majority Black population, as well as the events of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) inspired fear in those nations with the highest number of Black slaves, and therefore brought the Afro-Descendant to the forefront as a major theme in Latin American Romantic texts such as *Cecilia Valdés* (1882) by Cirilo Villaverde and *Sab* (1841)⁶ by Gertrudís Gómez de la Avellaneda.

Also contributing to the presence of Blacks in this literature was the concept of nationhood that the countries wanted to construct. Although, for some nations, the Black and Indigenous populations were viewed as stumbling blocks to the overall progress of Latin America as a whole (Branche 21), there were intellectuals who lobbied for the abolition of slavery altogether. The main reasons for this Abolitionism were political and military expediency

⁶ The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was the most successful of all slave uprisings, and inevitably led to the creation of the first Black Republic. The success of this revolt caused fear among Whites in Latin American countries with larger Black populations, and therefore, delayed the abolition of slavery in some nations such as Cuba (1886) and Brazil (1888) (Bostrom 115).

(Keen and Haynes 227); the size of the Black and Indigenous population made them useful soldiers in the fights for independence. The motives of the abolitionists in Cuba were even more complex. While several of the other Latin American nations had gained their political independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, the island still remained under strict Spanish rule. The restrictions imposed upon the island not only prevented certain texts from the outside from coming into Cuba, but it also limited what Cuban writers could write and publish. In response to this censorship, many writers sought to address themes in their texts that negated the Spanish customs they were obliged to follow. Lorna Williams remarks that, "Since Cubans were supposed to be identical to Spaniards at the time, a narrative founded on the notion of Cubanness that acknowledged the cultural contributions of the non-Hispanic element violated the rules of decorum to which writers in Cuba were expected to give allegiance"(4). Writers utilized the Black figure, therefore, as a means to distinguish themselves from Spain, and to express their discontent with the colonial system. Many identified with the Black slaves due to the repressive nature of Spanish government and felt that, in some respects, their own freedom would come at the cost of freeing Black slaves.

Also adding to this debate was the eradication of slavery among the English-speaking nations, particularly the colonies in the British Caribbean. News of widespread freedom spread among Black slaves on the island, which led to a few albeit unsuccessful slave revolts. In light of these recent events, Cuban intellectuals realized that they could no longer morally justify the institution (Williams 9-10), and began to seek other ways to supply the labor force that the African slaves would no longer supply. Since the Black population continued to grow due to the slave trade, several Cubans deemed it necessary to counterbalance the number of Black slaves by encouraging the immigration of Europeans to work in sugar cane fields on the island. This was

accomplished in part by writers who, through their anti-slavery novels, expressed the horrors of slavery while attempting to assuage fears of the existing Black populace. To this end, many of these works—*Sab* (1841), *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), and *Francisco* (1880) to name a few—portray the Black figure as one that is “docile, tranquil, resigned to his fate, and lacking a rebellious spirit” (Jackson 22). This domesticated image, though it served to convince readers of the negative effects of slavery, further underscored the weakness and the inferiority of Blacks to those of the White race.

Moreover, the majority of Black slaves depicted in the above mentioned novels were mulattoes. These protagonists were often portrayed with a higher sense of morality than those with fairer skin, while others were given Whiter features (Jackson 27). In spite of these characteristics, any attempt on the part of the protagonists to fully penetrate the White world was deemed impossible due to their blackness. La Avellaneda’s *Sab* is a humble mulatto slave who possesses a more charitable heart than most of the White characters in the story. He becomes enamored with his master’s daughter, but his blackness makes any hope of consummating this love impossible. In *Cecilia Valdés*, the title character is a mulatto woman who passes as a White woman, and eventually falls in love with a White man—later found to be her half-brother—who eventually rejects her and their unborn child for another White woman. *Francisco* (1880) tells the story of two lovers—one a Black slave, and the other a mulatto woman—whose love is forbidden by their jealous young master. In the end, the young woman is forced to give herself sexually to her master for the sake of her lover’s safety, and the young slave kills himself upon learning of the encounter. When the woman—Dorotea—discovers this, she dies of a broken heart. In creating such sentimental characters, the writers hoped to convince readers and potential

immigrants that slavery was morally wrong, that they were different from Spain, and that Blacks were not much of a threat to the island.

Although the majority of literary works addressing Black themes during this period was produced by White writers, it is noteworthy that there were also Black writers such as the Cuban poet Gabriel Concepción Valdés (otherwise known as Plácido) and the former slave Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1854) who wrote of their own experiences and struggles against racism as early as the nineteenth century. Manzano, mulatto poet and author of *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1839), is credited with the first documentation of the Black slave's experience in Cuba. His autobiography tells the story of how he taught himself to read and write in order to escape the abuse and oppression he experienced in the house of his mistress, Marquesa Ameno. The fact that the text was written while Manzano was still a slave carries special importance. The well-known critic Ivan Schulman remarks that the power of the "hegemonic white oligarchy, Creole or Spanish" carries much weight in the text (11). Manzano's longing for freedom is not just a desire to live as a free black, but to penetrate the white world (Schulman 21). This desire was undoubtedly what led him to write the text at the request of the literary critic Domingo Del Monte, who had read the poet's published work and felt that his experiences would convince readers of the negative implications of slavery. Due to the strict censorship imposed by Spanish rule, *Autobiografía* was ultimately published in England, where it was translated into English and included as part of a report at the General Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 (Molloy 395). Despite the good intentions of the writer and his patrons, the text has been scrutinized for Manzano's blatant self-separation from the African slave, referring to himself as mulatto. This emphasis on whiteness and the White aesthetic is a direct consequence of both the racism of the nineteenth century and the writer's profound desire to for integration into White

society. If indeed blackness carried a negative connotation in nineteenth century Cuba, Manzano's "avoidance of blackness in relating his story and his espousal of the cultural markers of whiteness point to a conscious constitution of self as a racial subject, one that is in strict accordance with the dictates of the dominant ideology of whitening" (Branche 136). In spite of the manipulation of the text by White intellectuals both in its editing and its translation, *Autobiografía* clearly shows the emotional damage Manzano incurred as a result of his enslavement and presents an alternative perspective to the White anti-slavery novels of the period.

By the time *Autobiografía* was published, Gabriel Concepción Valdés (1809-1844) had become a prominent figure in the Cuban literary circuit. Despite being a free mulatto in Matanzas, Cuba like his contemporary Manzano, Plácido was also a victim of the racism that all too often plagued Afro-Cubans. Although his poetry does not directly address the issue of slavery, he was known for his abolitionist campaigns. It was these convictions that caused him to be accused of participating in the La Escalera slave revolt and later executed in 1844. Topics in his poetry range from religious themes to the political themes of nationalism and freedom as seen in the poem "¡Habaneros, libertad!" (Plácido 401). According to Stephen Hart, the poet is most known for his satirical verse and his "flora cubana" poems (77). Later poems were often written in praise of a woman, comparing her beauty to that of a flower. Plácido, perhaps due to his marginalized state, is often condemned by critics for his White aesthetic; in one poem "Sugar Cane Blossom," ("La flor de la caña") Claudette Williams claims that the object of the poetic voice's affection is most likely a white woman as evidenced by the description of "blond tresses" and "red lips" (24). She further asserts that the fact that Plácido's poetry points to a White aesthetic demonstrates that, like Manzano, the poet is "an example of an Afro-Caribbean writer

whose imitation of the writing of the dominant White culture is symptomatic of the self-denying mentality of the colonized” (24). The works of Manzano and Plácido, while they present somewhat skewed perceptions of blackness given their historical context, still establish a point of departure for later Afro-Hispanic writers who, in search of a true Black aesthetic, sought to vindicate blackness in a colonialized system.

In contrast to the anti-slavery texts of Cuba, several twentieth century writers viewed the Black figure as not just a vehicle for their socio-political agendas, but rather as one of many representative voices of their homelands. The result was a movement known as Negrismo, a poetic movement lasting from 1926 to around 1940 that integrated folklore, music and language in poetry as a means to capture the essence of the Caribbean culture. This movement was a literary response to a European interest in African art and culture, as well as to such post World War I artistic movements as surrealism. It also coincided with the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, the last two Latin American colonies of Spain, and the countries with the highest Black populations. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the writers and politicians in these nations—during the wars for independence—placed more emphasis on incorporating Blacks into society. As previously mentioned above, Afro-Cubans, as well as Puerto Ricans, served as tremendous military support during the wars. In an article written in the newspaper *Patria*, the Cuban revolutionary José Martí asserts that

‘Man’ means more than white, more than mulatto, more than negro. ‘Cuban’ means more than white, more than mulatto, more than negro. On the battlefields, the souls of whites and blacks have risen through the air. In that daily life of defense, loyalty, brotherhood, and shrewdness, there was always a black man at the side of every white. (319)

Despite the role Blacks and Indigenous peoples played in the independence wars and the nationalist discourse that circulated among the Latin America nations, racism and socioeconomic disparity still remained a problem. The beginning of the twentieth century was characterized by a deep interest in these issues, specifically with regard to the recognition of the importance of Black and Indigenous peoples to Latin America's blossoming economy. Although the Indigenous population was gaining importance in México, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru, the Black individual became a major literary theme in the Caribbean, where the Indigenous presence was little if not nonexistent (Mansour 135).

Also pertinent to this discussion of Negrismo is the growing interest in Black themes in Europe. The *vogue nègre*, or Black Vogue, was most dominant in France, where art dealers and artists found in African art, folklore, and music the inspiration needed to diminish the horrific images of the First World War that had besieged their continent. One such art dealer was the Parisian Paul Guillaume, whose interest in Black art led him to open his own art gallery in 1914 and to organize exhibits of African works for the public (Wynn 109). Another important event that catalyzed the Negrista Movement was the popularity of jazz and blues in the United States. The genre of music was the offspring of the traditional Negro spirituals sung by Black slaves during slavery. The interest in African and African American cultural products found its way to the Caribbean through Latin American intellectuals who had left their homes to study in France or other European countries, and had returned back to their homelands with the hope of incorporating aspects of the aesthetic in their own works.

Negrista poetry not only portrayed the Black individual's day to day struggle to overcome poverty and racism, but it also endeavored to depict Black life with a strong emphasis on what were considered purely Afro-Antillean cultural products (i.e., la rumba, Afro-Cuban

dialects, etc.). Luis Palés Matos (1898-1959), a Puerto Rican avant-garde poet, utilized such techniques as onomatopoeia and distinct rhythmic patterns to portray the spirit of African culture. These elements are seen most prominently in his famous poem, “Danza negra” in *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1937). Mamadou Badame remarks that “Black themes offered Palés Matos the opportunity to explore new sounds and new places that did not exist in European literature”(22). Like many of the modernist and avant-garde poets of the period, Palés Matos sought to escape the monotony of daily existence by exploring and creating exotic spaces. Margot Arce, in her introduction to the *Poesía completa y prosa selecta de Luis Palés Matos*, notes that the poet “siente instintivamente la necesidad de escapar del ambiente estático y de su propia inercia espiritual y se fuga, ya a las regiones boreales, ya a los pueblos del trópico negro, polos tanto por el clima y la situación geográfica como por el sentido simbólico que les atribuye en sus versos⁷” (xv). The poet not only saw the Black world as an escape, but it was also an integral part of Puerto Rican society and identity as a whole.

Another prominent figure in Negrista poetry was Emilio Ballagas. Like Palés Matos, Ballagas believed that one could not speak of his nation’s identity without acknowledging the Black presence in the Antilles. Though his work rarely confronts the social ills experienced by Afro-Cubans (Mansour 141), it attempts to replicate the Black world through language play, varied rhythmic patterns, and an emphasis on the sensorial. After the publication of his *Cuaderno de poesía negra* (1934), he moved away from negrista poetry as, for him, the labeling of poetry as “Black” or “White” wrongly delineated the genre altogether. Instead, as Badiane

⁷ “[Palés Matos] feels instinctively the necessity to escape from the static environment and from his own spiritual inertia, and he escapes to either to the Northern regions or to the villages of the Black tropics, distinct poles not only because of their climates and their geographic locations, but also due to the symbolic meaning that he attributes to them in his verses” (xv).

points out, Ballagas advocated more of a cultural hybridization approach to poetry (15). He is credited with the publications of several anthologies that feature Afro-Hispanic works.⁸

The literature written during the 1940s and 1950s in Latin America was characterized by an emphasis on the social and economic inequalities that still remained as a result of the colonial system. The novels featured in this period—also known as the *Costumbrismo* period—incorporated Black and Indigenous figures with the intent of revealing the social injustices faced by the marginalized populaces. The problem with this literature as with the texts of the *Negrismo* period and the anti-slavery novels was the presence of racial stereotypes and “a simplistic view of Latin American reality as ‘civilization’ vs. ‘barbarism’” (Williams, R. 5). Countering this movement were the avant-garde movements centered in the major cities of Buenos Aires and Mexico City. Alejo Carpentier, a Cuban novelist and essayist, was heavily involved in this movement. His work on the novel *¡Ecue-Yamba-O!* (1933) reflects both an attempt to recognize the presence of the Black voice in Cuba and his interest in French ethnography. The modern Cuban society that Carpentier portrays in the novel is a stark contrast to the magic and mystery surrounding the Afro-Cuban community. For him, the Afro-Cuban world represented an “antídoto de Wall Street” and a place to where the White Cuban could find refuge from the influence of the United States (Carpentier qtd. in Pancrazio 165). Carpentier’s text is not without flaws, however. As the author himself remarks in his book of essays, *Tientos y diferencias* (1967): “...twenty years of research about the syncretic realities of Cuba made me realize that everything profound and real, everything universal about the world that I had pretended to portray in my novel had remained outside my field of observation” (cited in Echevarría 63). Jerome Branche problematizes the work, asserting that while the text fulfilled “the requirements

⁸ See *Antología de la poesía negra hispanoamericana* (1935) and *Mapa de la poesía negra Americana* (1946).

of the European taste for the exotic, it did not do justice either to the black constituency upon which it was based or to the nation” (235). Although the White negrista writers—and later the avant-gardists—intended to create realistic representations of Black life in their homelands, the result was essentially caricatured and romanticized. According to critic Richard Jackson, “Despite the artistic achievement of some of this literature on black themes, the credibility of some of the white writers suffers because they project images of black people that are unrealistic when we consider the viewpoint they take toward black psychology” (*The Black Image*, 132). Edward Mullen concurs with this perspective further suggesting that the White negrista writers overemphasized Black sensuality and onomatopoeia, and that a true representation of Black writing begins with Nicolás Guillén and Regino Pedroso (as cited in Arnedo Gómez 12). In spite of the criticism directed towards the White negrista writers, their works not only set the stage for Afro-Hispanic writers who wanted to portray their culture in writing their own experiences, but they were a necessary step in the continued process of conceptualizing Black identity in a Latin American context.

The Black vogue in Europe, as well as the denigration of European civilization during and following World War I sparked in Latin America a reassessment of national and cultural identities that had been established as early as the Colonial period. The Negrismo or Negrista Movement of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s was essentially part of a search for a true Latin American identity, but it was also a fundamental stage in an ongoing yet gradual process of decolonization. While many of the Negrista texts and the early works written by Black authors bear the influence of the racist, hegemonic discourses prominent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, their value lies in the fact that they problematized, and ultimately helped to rewrite the history that the colonial system had so carefully constructed. This revisionist process

continued with the later Afro-Hispanic writers who sought to create realistic representations of Blacks that underscored the complexity of their cultures. Perhaps one of the most famous of these writers was the Afro-Cuban Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), who, in recognition of a true African patronage, challenged the notion of racial purity by incorporating the Black voice within Cuban history and culture. His acceptance of mulatto identity, unlike Manzano and Plácido, is not a negation of blackness altogether, but rather is a necessary stage for decolonization since the process requires, as Fanon puts it, “encounter between two congenially antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation” (2). Guillén recognized in his poetry the existence of a painful and violent past and present, but he also saw that the history and the continued reach of racism is what creates an inextricable bond between Blacks and Whites. This connection is demonstrated most prominently in the mulatto figure, whose presence dominates much of Guillén’s work in his second collection of poems, *Sóngoro cósongo* (1931). In one of his most famous poems in the anthology, “La canción del bongó,” Guillén links the White man and the Black man to synthesize a formula with which he can transcend racism and, ultimately, the colonial system (Benitez-Rojo 127-28, Guillén 30-31). In addition to being a poet, Guillén was active in key political and cultural organizations that he felt addressed the issues of Cuban society as a whole. His affiliation with the Communist Party in 1936, and his later involvement with the Cuban Revolution would greatly shape his poetry, as well as his interest in Black issues. As Kubayanda notes in his study of Guillén: “. . . a greater concern with Cuban identity, national politics, and United States corporate involvement in the Caribbean Basin came to dominate his later works” (2). Although Guillén is sometimes labeled as a Negrista poet, his preoccupation with both racial

and national issues and his creation of a unique Black Antillean aesthetic distinguishes him from other Negrista writers.

While Negritismo continued to gain popularity in the Hispanophone Caribbean, a new movement was taking shape among the Black intellectuals in Paris. This new ideology—later known by the French word *Négritude* as coined by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire—would eventually make its way from the salons of Paris to the Americas, where it found resonance with the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and with Afrocubanism⁹. The founding fathers of this literary yet political movement—the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and the French Guianese Leon Damas—sought to connect Afro-Descendants across linguistic, cultural and religious borders through the acknowledgement of a common history of slavery and discrimination. Senghor, in his article “Negritude: A Humanism of the 20th Century,” defines Negritude as “the sum of the cultural values of the Black world” (28). To determine what those cultural values were, these writers looked to Africa for inspiration, recreating in their work lush African landscapes, the rhythm of African drums, and the rich peel of Black voices.

The Negritude Movement, beginning in the early 1930s, began to lose steam in the 1960s when young Blacks, disenchanted by what they felt was primarily a literary movement, instead sought what they believed were more active means of obtaining equal rights for themselves. One critic of the movement, Stanislas Adotevi, believed that while Negritude gave Africans and Afro-

⁹ Afrocubanism was an artistic movement resulting from the economic crisis in Cuba that occurred shortly after the island nation’s independence from Spain in 1898. The chaos of workers’ strikes, racial inequality, economic disparity, American influences and anti-nationalist discourse inspired artists to seek out purely Cuban forms of expression (Pappademos 344). This search for authentic Cuban cultural products led to an interest in the African presence on the island, namely in the areas of music, dance and literature. Occurring around the same time as Negritismo, Afrocubanism is more concerned with the social and economic conditions of Afro-Cubans. Roanne Edwards distinguishes the two movements by saying that the Negrista writers often showed little concern for the living conditions of Black Cubans and portrayed them as objects of sensuality (122). Dawn Duke asserts that the Negrista Movement was, in fact, part of Afrocubanism (80). The latter inspired a movement away from negative perceptions of Afro-Cuban culture (Duke 80).

Descendants “courage . . . needed to dare protest against the humiliation of the thirties” (Nettleford 81), it persisted in maintaining Eurocentric standards of beauty, truth, and poetic structure. In spite of the noted limitations of Negritude (e.g., its inability to account for linguistic and cultural barriers and its adherence to Eurocentric standards of poetics), the movement continued an ongoing process of redefining the notion of identity, and, more specifically, blackness.

The definition of blackness was not only an issue among Afro-Descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean, but it was also a concern among African American intellectuals who, as a result of their political, economic and social disenfranchisement, questioned their position in American society. One such scholar, the African American essayist, sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois explored the intricacies of the African American identity in his book of essays entitled *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In the first chapter of the book —“Our Spiritual Strivings”—DuBois explains the African Americans’ search for identity in a country that did not want them:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this *double-consciousness*, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, --an America, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois 2, emphasis mine)

To overcome this crisis, DuBois asserts that the African American must foster and develop his traits and talents, “not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day (sic) on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack” (7). The African American, in essence, must define himself and recognize his unique abilities so that he can then employ them for the benefit of all American society. This can only be achieved through education and an awareness of both his Africanness and his Americanness. Himself a Pan-Africanist and an active part of the Negritude Movement, DuBois refused to accept that Africans and those of African ancestry were on the bottom of the great chain of being and that blackness was something shameful (Hubbard 9). His *Souls of Black Folk* is both an attempt to show the originality and beauty of African American culture and a reversal of the perception that the Black man is himself a problem. In his introduction to the collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later*, Hubbard contends that the souls to which DuBois refers in his title are not just “prototypes of the central figures in the black community” (5-6) but also a representation of the multifaceted nature of African American identity. The connotation of “soul” in religious discourse is that of the true essence of an individual, or rather the part of a person that informs his or her identity. *The Souls of Black Folk*, then, is an endeavor to define the collective personality of African American culture, and a demonstration of how these souls have contributed and continued to contribute to the overall development of American society. Furthermore, DuBois’s work, like that of his Afro-Latin American contemporaries, purports to destigmatize blackness while proclaiming the value of its cultural products in a national context. Using this discussion of development of a Black literary consciousness in Latin America and

DuBois's work as a point of departure, I will now discuss in the following section the theoretical implications of Afro-Latinity in a U.S. context.

Theoretical Considerations

In the article "Triple-Consciousness?: Approaches to Afro-Latino Culture in the United States," Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román make the assertion that Afro-Latinos, "[i]n their quest for a full and appropriate sense of social identity . . . are thus typically pulled in three directions at once and share a complex, multidimensional optic on contemporary society" (321). Utilizing the concept of "double-consciousness" attributed to W.E.B. DuBois, they define these three directions as "three souls, three unreconciled strivings; three warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (327). In other words, Afro-Latinos not only have to contend with their connectedness to their Latin American roots, but they also have to face the pressures of assimilation to American society and the implications of their blackness in a nation where one's race ultimately defines his or her identity. Flores and Jiménez, while they claim that DuBois's concept may serve to explain the interplay of the racial and ethnic stratifications inherent in Afro-Latinity, also question the appropriateness of the term "consciousness" in light of historical perspectives, currently established notions of identity, and social positionality (327). Nevertheless, the article does not offer an alternative for the term.

In the context of DuBois's work, the word "consciousness" is strongly connected to "awareness," or the state of being cognizant of an external fact or circumstance. As previously mentioned, the activist describes the African American as being born with a veil that, while it does not afford him the ability to see himself with his own eyes, allows him to see himself through the revelation of the other (White) world (DuBois 2). He follows this by suggesting that

Blacks have a double-consciousness, or rather that they have to always measure themselves according to the statutes of a culture that looks at them with contempt (2). In essence, we can define this double-consciousness as an double-sided inferiority complex—one is not only constantly made aware of the fact that he or she does not have his or her own identity (it is imposed), but that he or she is inadequate because of that fact. For this reason, DuBois calls for cultural awareness among African Americans. This is to say that if Blacks can collectively know who they are and where they come from, they can break free from the vicious cycle of the inferiority complex. What is perplexing about this conceptualization is the fact that the term consciousness implies that a Black person is constantly aware of these conflicts. Although racism and discrimination were very overt in DuBois's time, the concept of race has since changed. Moreover, many Afro-Descendants, depending upon where and how they were raised, have different perceptions of their racial and ethnic identities. For instance, many African Americans or Afro-Latinos do not have typical Negroid features. Therefore, they may not be subject to the same limitations typically imposed on Blacks in American society, or they may not be completely aware of some of the issues prevalent in the African American community. Where do these people fit in relation to the concept of double or triple-consciousness? Do these issues constitute a separate consciousness, or do these people lack consciousness altogether?

Furthermore, the term *consciousness* as it is used in *Souls* and in Flores and Jiménez's article can also lead to essentialism. Dubois's work clearly calls for a more universal understanding of blackness and Black identity. If one were to base his or her understanding of Afro-Latinity on DuBois's double-consciousness construct, he or she would have to define those individual components—namely Blackness and Latinity—in more concrete terms. This is a difficult task given that Blacks and Latinos have a wide variety of phenotypes and cultures, and

there is much debate about what “Black” and “Latino” actually mean. Additionally, this dynamic fails to consider the impact that gender and gender roles have on identity. Does a person’s sex constitute a separate consciousness, or is it even worth considering at all in conjunction with race and ethnicity? How does one navigate the troubled waters of multiple identities in a nation that compartmentalizes identities in neatly packaged theoretical boxes?

Although the notions of double and triple-consciousness can prove problematic when applied to the concept of Afro-Latinity, they do help to explain the internal conflict that ensues when one with multiple identities is being forced to put him or herself in a category with which he or she may not completely identify. They also bring to light the issues of inferiority and feelings of inadequacy as they relate to Blackness and Latinity. What Flores and Jiménez present in both the previously mentioned article and in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* is a new way of looking at race and ethnicity. By positioning Afro-Latinity as an alternative form of Blackness that is not African American, both theorists are challenging the current system of racialization in the United States. Triple-consciousness, then, becomes a springboard for a more comprehensive theory that accounts for both the differences and the similarities between individuals in the Afro-Latino community.

When approaching the topic of Afro-Latinity, it is important to acknowledge the politicized nature of the term itself. The ethnic category “Latino” is highly controversial because it is an attempt to lump individuals from different nations, cultures, and nations into one group. Moreover, it fails to take into consideration the multiple identities such as race, religious affiliation, and nationality that exist under the blanket of ethnicity. The prefix “Afro” acknowledges a connection to Africa, as well as the effects of the process of diaspora on Afro-Descendants. As illustrated in the discussion on racialization in the United States, the

conglomeration of African and Latin American ancestries is often perceived as problematic because of the existence of a Black-White paradigm; a person can be Black or Latino, but he or she cannot be both. That said, the theoretical approach that I am proposing addresses the intricacies of the term without disavowing the similarities that exist within the people group. It acknowledges the effects that partial acculturation and diaspora have had on the Afro-Latino personality, but it also recognizes that while identities are constantly transformed, the perceptions and attitudes that shape them may not change. Using the notion of triple-consciousness as a point of departure, I describe Afro-Latino identity at its basic level as a converging of three main tendencies rather than consciousnesses. The term “tendencies” takes into consideration that people are not always aware of the mechanisms at play in the formation of their identities. The three tendencies are the need to assimilate to American cultures and practices, the acknowledgement of Latin American roots, and a sense of isolation due to the reality of racism and discrimination toward blackness in the United States. The tension between these three strivings, as well as the different racializations of Latin America and North America is what characterizes and differentiates the Afro-Latino experience from that of other people groups. To avoid the dangers of cultural essentialism, I refer to both the theory of intersectionality as proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as the Familial-Historical View of Latino identity from Jorge Gracia to explain the ways in which these three tendencies intersect. Both theories support the ideas that identities change over time, and that there are cultural differences among Afro-Latinos. They also explain how the interactions between the previously mentioned tensions manifest in language, self-representation, and in the adaptation of Afro-Latin American traditions in an U.S. context. The following section will describe the literary

manifestations of these three tensions to construct a theoretical basis for what I define as an Afro-Latino literary discourse.

Towards the Development of an Afro-Latino/a Literary Discourse

The development of a Black consciousness movement in the Arts in Latin America found its inspiration in the connections that Afro-Latin American writers had to African American movements and writers in the United States. James Weldon Johnson, a writer and a scholar of African American literature, made several links between Black American works and those of Afro-Latin Americans in his work *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) (Mills 119). There were also Black Latinos in the United States who aligned themselves with both the African American and Latin American communities on American soil. These exchanges greatly influenced Blacks living in the Caribbean and in Central and South America who sought better social and political conditions for their communities. African American interest in the art and literature of Afro-Latin-Americans, as well as in their social and political situations, had a major effect on the literary production of Black Latin American writers, particularly during the 1960s and the 1970s. According to a study conducted by Vera Kutinski, “several Latin American presses reissued classic Afro-Hispanic novels including *Juyungo* by Adalberto Ortiz” (cited in Mills 122). Furthermore, the 1960s Black Power Movement also encouraged the development of an Afro-Latin American literary canon with the intent of creating a sense of unity among Black writers (Mills 122).

With the above discussion in line, it becomes possible to move towards the construction of a literary manifestation that, for the purposes of this discussion, will be identified as Afro-Latino literature. There are fundamental problems engrained in the selection of this name as a

result of the complication associated with the original root term “Latino.” According to the philosopher Jorge Gracia, there are several issues with the word, particularly in the way that is currently used in modern-day American society. As previously mentioned, the categorization has been criticized for its failure to acknowledge the distinct nuances that characterize the variety of cultures that exist within a larger Latin American culture. Gracia asserts that “identities are the result of complex historical processes that shape us individually and as groups” (15). That said, persons belonging to the same ethnic group may have distinct affiliations due to the historical processes that have fashioned them individually. “Latino” is even more problematic for U.S. Afro-Latinos, who because of their phenotype, are often seen as being only Black. Due to the history of slavery, Jim Crow law and, in large part, to the Civil Rights Movement, the notion of multiple ethnic or racial identities is troublesome in the United States because it challenges the bi-polar perception of race. For this reason, Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez have asserted that the category “Afro-Latino” is a highly political term that has yet to be completely agreed upon (1)¹⁰. Furthermore, ethnic identities are often confused for racial identities among Latinos and Latin Americans (Alcoff 237). Therefore, an Afro-Puerto Rican may only identify him or herself as solely Puerto Rican instead of Black. This naturally causes problems for government agencies that gather information on these communities with the intent of assisting them.

As a solution to the vagueness of the term, Gracia proposes a Familial-Historical View of Latino Identities.¹¹ This theory suggests that Latinos, irrespective of their nationalities, form “extended families” (e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.) whose members do not possess any

¹⁰ See footnote 1.

¹¹ This theory states that “Latino identities are identities of Latino ethne, and Latino ethne are sub-groups of individual humans that satisfy the following conditions: (1) they belong to many generations; (2) they are organized as families and break down into extended families; and (3) they are united through historical relations that produce features which, in context, serve (i) to identify the members of the groups and (ii) to distinguish them from members of other groups” (Gracia 17).

identifiable qualities. Nevertheless, the historical connections between the extended families may produce characteristics that some members share, which, in turn, separate the larger family from other social groups (Gracia 18). This system allows for greater flexibility in the way that these groups choose to identify themselves, and adequately explains how Latino subgroups relate to or identify with one another.

Having established the problematic nature of the term “Afro-Latino,” one can observe how these elements manifest themselves in the context of an Afro-Latino literary discourse. According to Mills, Afro-Latino literature primarily concerns itself with critiquing “U.S. foreign policy and interaction with their island communities (a kind of neo-colonialism), an emphasis on more fluid conceptions of identity, and fusion of African and Latin American peoples and heritages based on shared experiences of discrimination and displacement” (112). The act of writing for Afro-Latinos, however, is not only a means to address these concerns, but also an attempt to gain legitimacy in a society that has yet to acknowledge their unique positioning as both “Black” and “Latino.” As Valerie Smith points out in her study of African American testimonial literature, “the process of authorship. . . provide[s] the narrators with a measure of authority unknown to them in either real or fictional life” (2). It is of note that much of the literature by U.S. Afro-Latinos was produced during and after the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by struggles for equality and by alliances between marginalized groups. These writers, through their texts, sought to document their experiences with discrimination while “engag[ing] with and challeng[ing] the dominant ideology” (Smith 2). For this reason, many of the works produced by Afro-Latino writers are autobiographical. Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) tells the story of Thomas’ childhood and his coming to terms with the reality of being Black and Latino in a racially polarized society. His work not only brings to light the racist

ideologies prevalent in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, but also the ways in which those perceptions can shape and inform one's identity. Evelio Grillo's *Black Cuban, Black American* (2000) raises fundamental questions about how our self-perception is often shaped by our cultural interactions. Like Thomas, Grillo's close proximity to African Americans throughout much of his childhood and adult life during the 1920s and 1930s, and the segregation of White and Black Cubans ultimately led to his assimilation into the Black American community. His work testifies to the fact that several Afro-Latinos—due to their unique composition—have integrated into African American communities to gain acceptance and success in larger Anglo-American society (Mills 117).

Other writers turned to the essay and to poetry as a means to protest the social ills prevalent in their societies. One such essayist, Carlos Cooks, addresses the systematic political and economic disenfranchisement of Blacks in the United States in his essay "Hair Conking; Buy Black." A Dominican born Black activist, Cooks challenged White standards of beauty, and encouraged Blacks to buy from one another so as to "scientifically transfer the commerce, business life, and body politic of the alien parasite to its rightful owner, the Black communities [. . .]" (Cooks 213). Poets such as Miguel Algarín, Sandra María Esteves, Felipe Luciano and Víctor Hernández Cruz introduce African elements in their poetry, and contest static notions of identity prevalent in U.S. society. Felipe Luciano, in his poem, "Jíbaro, My Pretty Nigger," epitomizes the Black Latino's search for identity in his writing of his Black ancestors into Puerto Rican history. The mix of Spanish and English in his work, as well as in many other Afro-Latino texts, points to the cultural interactions between Afro-Latinos and Anglos while serving to break linguistic barriers between these two groups (Ihrie and Oropesa 11).

Although poetry, essays, and autobiographies have been the most common literary genres produced by Afro-Latinos, the recent changes in U.S. foreign policy and the influx of Latin American immigrants to the United States have instigated interest in the novel as a creative medium to address broader questions of identity and socioeconomic disparity in American and Latin American society. Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) deals with the cultural and social consequences of diaspora and discrimination, while rewriting Dominican history for a U.S. context. Loida Maritza Pérez, in her novel *Geographies of Home* (1999), confronts such issues as mental illness, racism, and domestic violence. These works indicate an interest on the part of Afro-Latino writers in procuring social justice in their countries of origin, as well as in their local communities. This dual-interest, in essence, defines and shapes the Afro-Latino collective experience. In voicing this experience through writing, these artists have sought not only to gain legitimacy in American society, but also to empower those that share their experiences and culture.

Organization of the Dissertation

My dissertation will analyze Afro-Latino literature with the intent of demonstrating that Afro-Latinity represents a unique, identifiable position visible in writing. My critical approach to this discussion is anchored in the theory of intersectionality, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept of “double-consciousness” as coined by the African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois and Jorge Gracia's Familial-Historical View of Latino Identities. In her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” Crenshaw asserts that individuals possess multiple identities that intersect in a variety of ways. Oftentimes, these intersections contribute to social inequality. Crenshaw bases this assertion on

her investigations of battered women of color. She found that several organizations created to help battered women get out of abusive situations failed to take into consideration the cultural nuances of African American, Asian, and Latina women. The social issues that these women face—immigration law, economic and emotional dependence on husbands, and unemployment—are different from those of white middle-class women. Though women of color have access to battered women's shelters and help centers, their cultural differences often keep them from even taking advantage of these services. Crenshaw suggests, therefore, that an understanding of the stratifications of identities can help government-sponsored and charity organizations better assess the needs of individuals and provide resources that address the concerns of a wider audience. In my dissertation, I plan to explore how the African element of the Afro-Latino identity creates a different dynamic for those living in the United States. To this end, I will consider the following questions: What happens when an Afro-Latino individual who comes from one place where he is perceived one way comes to live in another place where he is seen as something completely different? How do the different strata of identities affect an Afro-Latino's self-concept?

To answer these questions, I turn to both W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double-consciousness and Jorge Gracia's Familial-Historical View of Latino Identities. In my dissertation, I contend that Afro-Latinos possess three main strivings. On the one hand, they are aware of their Latin American roots, but on the other, they are pressured to assimilate to the norms established by American society. Their Afrocentric appearances also make them susceptible to double racial discrimination by the dominant power group—usually Whites or, at times, other Latinos. The tension between these three strivings—the need to assimilate, the connection to Latin American roots, and isolation as a result of racism—results in a unique

identity formation. I will also demonstrate that historical realities of slavery, racial discrimination and partial acculturation have all contributed to certain common manifestations (e.g., language play, the search for a sense of home, and the impostor complex) of Afro-Latinity in literary discourse.

In Chapter One, I will trace the evolution of the concept of race in Latin America and in the United States to show their similarities and differences. I will then discuss how these distinctions have affected and continue to affect the formation of Afro-Latino identity in those who have either immigrated to the United States at a young age, or who were born in the United States. In Chapter Two, I will discuss how Afro-Latinity is expressed through language. For this section, I will analyze the way in which the Afro-Dominican Junot Díaz combines Dominican elements with urban American expressions in his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. As the author admits in an interview with *The Independent*, the language that he uses is not just Spanglish, but it is tinged with various elements that make it distinctive: “African diasporic, migrant, Caribbean, Dominican, Jersey boy – these are my building blocks. . . It's more an interlocking chain than any one point” (Jaggi, “Junot Díaz, a Truly All-American Writer”). The presence of multiple languages/voices in the novel are a consequence of the historical and political realities of the Dominican Republic and the United States that have worked together to create the story. Díaz employs language games to create the dual effect of distancing from and connecting to the reader. This style of writing recreates for the reader the sensation of being an immigrant and outsider within his or her own culture. The result, as my analysis of the reader reviews will show, is a sense of discomfort that prevents some readers from fully understanding and enjoying the novel. In addition, Díaz uses terms in Dominican Spanish that speak directly to his acknowledgement of an African heritage. This, however, is not common among Afro-

Dominicans on the island who, in some cases, adamantly deny their blackness altogether. I argue that the language game that Díaz plays with the text draws attention to the complexity and the uniqueness of the Afro-Latino identity, while demonstrating that it is this very multifaceted complex that determines Oscar and his family members' fates.

In Chapter Three, I will address the issue of the "imposter complex." For this section, I will analyze the autobiographies *Down These Mean Streets* by Afro-Puerto Rican Piri Thomas, and *Black Cuban, Black American* by Afro-Cuban Evelio Grillo. I will discuss how the authors' phenotypes connect them to the African American community, but distance them from the Latino community. This situation creates problems for both authors; Grillo and Thomas must contend with the sense of belonging to neither group. Though their responses to this phenomenon are different, it is evident that these men must overtly participate in some performance of blackness in order to survive. This performance involves an internalization of cultural nuances that ultimately provokes in both men a preoccupation with issues of social justice in the Black American and Latino communities. I argue that the authors' decision to write their life stories is not only an act of resistance of White supremacy, but it is also a means of writing the Afro-Latino community into existence.

Chapter Four will discuss the notion of "home" and the latter's connection to identity formation in Afro-Latina women. In this section, I will analyze the main female characters in the novel *Geographies of Home* by Loida Maritza Pérez. The novel centers on the lives of a large Dominican family who relocate to the United States due to the atrocities of the Trujillo regime. The parents of the family—Aurelia and Papito—attempt to make the best life that they can for their children, but cannot escape the effects of the loneliness and isolation they feel as immigrants. In the novel, there are conflicting concepts of home and identity that interact and

cause misunderstanding among the family members. Interestingly enough, the physical homes of the main characters in the story are falling apart, which signifies the sense of isolation and decay that the individuals in the family feel both personally and in their relationships with one another. In light of this, the family is forced to return to their roots in an effort to recover a sense of home and identity that helps them transcend their current reality. This search for home characterizes the journey to self-acceptance that many Afro-Latinas have faced in order to overcome the obstacles of racism and self-loathing unique to those in their community. However, as Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román assert in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* and as evident in the transformations in both Iliana and her mother by the end of the novel, “[w]hile the very presence of Latin@s of visible African descent is the most significant countervailing pressure against this divisive and self-demeaning tendency [preference toward whiteness], increasingly Afro-Latin@s are taking more assertive measures and actively challenging traditional notions” (470). This process involves a greater understanding and an acceptance of one’s roots.

In the conclusion, I will address the Afro-Latino’s concern with social justice both in their countries of origin and their U.S. communities. This will serve as a point of departure for the idea that continued study of Afro-Latino literature can provide insight into the cross-cultural exchanges between Latinos and African Americans. These connections are integral to these groups’ mutual success in overcoming discrimination and socioeconomic disparity. I will also discuss the importance of Afro-Latino literary discourse within the context of a larger World literature. The term “Afro-Latino” accurately describes the complexity of cultural interactions across continents. Our comprehension of Afro-Latino culture and identity formation, therefore, is key to a greater understanding of how the process of globalization is changing the way we see others as well as ourselves. For this reason, and in large part due to the changing demographics

of the United States, the area of Afro-Latino literary discourse is one that deserves more attention and exploration.

CHAPTER ONE — AFRO-LATINITY IN THE MAKING: A HISTORY OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE UNITED STATES

“The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution [...] History must restore what slavery took away. [...] We find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest and apt out of the pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all.”

--Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925)

“The movement of the Negro [is] more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—[...] a deliberate flight [...] from medieval America to modern.”

--Alain Locke, “The New Negro” (1925)¹²

The Afro-Latino experience is one that has garnered much attention in the last five years. Researchers Fiona Mills, Suzanne Oboler, and Anani Dzidzienyo have asserted that study of Black Latino culture and literature can provide greater insight into the issues and concerns of the African American and Hispanic American communities (Mills 122). Other researchers have commented on how an understanding of Afro-Latino identity can lead to the redefinition and breaking down of socially established ethnic categories (E. Ochoa and G. Ochoa 198). The duality of the Afro-Latino’s identity has also made this community the center of debate in the academic sphere, where socially created racial and ethnic labels continue to prevail in studies of culture and literature. In studies and anthologies, the great majority of works written by Afro-Latinos are categorized as either African American or Latino texts (Mills 112). This delineation not only gives testament to the rigidity of ethnic groupings, but it also points to scholars’ efforts to keep the areas of African American and Hispanic-American literature exclusive of each other (Mills 112). To challenge this separation, Puerto Rican scholars Miriam Jiménez Román and

¹² Both epigraphs are quoted in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925).

Juan Flores compiled and wrote *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*. Published in 2011, this book not only recognizes the contributions of Afro-Latinos in the United States, but it also gives voice to their singular experience as a multiethnic group. While the anthology presents and acknowledges the legacy of the Afro-Latino community in the United States, and seeks to relate their experiences to a wider audience, its introduction has been criticized for the lack of contextualization it offers with respect to the manifestation of blackness in Latin American and the Hispanophone Caribbean (Latorre 6). This situation uncovers the primary dilemma facing Afro-Latino studies: how to construct its own sense of selfhood. This chapter seeks to better contextualize the ongoing discussion of what comprises an Afro-Latino literature by exploring the perspectives of race and examining the development of Black consciousness movements in Latin America, as well as that of the United States. This discussion will serve as a point of departure for a look at how these distinctive viewpoints and histories have affected and continue to affect the identity formation of Afro-Latinos who were either born in or recently immigrated to the United States.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Afro-Latino identity consists of three “tensions” or “strivings.” First of all, an Afro-Hispanic American must grapple with his or her sense of Latinity. Although the degree of Latin American influence greatly depends on any number of environmental and social factors –namely the individual’s proximity to Latino culture, knowledge and acknowledgement of these roots—the search for Latin American roots is a running theme in works produced by Afro-Latino writers. The second dimension has to do with the individual’s need to assimilate to the cultural norms established by American society.¹³ The third tension is connected to the individual’s Afrocentric appearance, and how he or she navigates the conflicting perceptions of race of the two other dimensions. The need to negotiate

¹³ Here I am using the label “American” as a general term to refer to the United States, and not to Latin America.

the complex waters of ethnic and racial categorizations particularly in relationship to two historically marginalized groups constitutes the main internal conflict of Afro-Latino protagonists. Therefore, to properly describe the identity formation of Afro-Latinos, one must not only understand the perceptions of race in both the United States and Latin America, but also the historical events that have shaped and continue to shape them. The following sections provide a description and the history of the concept of racial and ethnic identities in Latin America and North America with the intent of demonstrating both its complexity and its effect on Afro-Latinos/as living in a U.S. context.

Development of the Concept of Race in Latin America 1700-1930

A discussion of the development of a Black consciousness in the Hispanophone Caribbean must begin with slavery and colonization since both historical processes contributed to current images and perceptions of Blacks in the Caribbean. This section will briefly discuss the structure of these systems in this area, as well as some philosophies that influenced Latin American thinkers and their views on slavery. Finally, I will address the development of the Black Movement in Latin America, and how Black consciousness is shaping current perceptions of race in Latin America as a whole. This discussion will, in essence, serve as a basis for the reader's understanding of Afro-Latino's struggle for cultural acceptance in both the Latino community and in mainstream American society.

The prosperity of the African Slave Trade in the Caribbean was primarily due to the success of the sugarcane industry in the nineteenth century. The demand for sugarcane was so great that several countries—namely Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil—grew to depend on the industry as a main source of income. In the case of Cuba, the *ingenio* or *sugar mill* became a symbol of

Cuban identity and culture by the late nineteenth century (Gates 180). The importance of sugar in Cuba was a direct result of the slave uprising in Haiti that ultimately led to its independence from France in 1804; the chaos of the Haitian Revolution stunted the sugar economy in Haiti, and Cuba took its place as the world's lead producer of sugarcane (Yun 12). The bustling sugar economy and the birth of the first Black republic would also have other consequences in Cuba and other islands in the Caribbean. Sarah Franklin asserts that the large Black population in Cuba inspired fear in Whites, who in light of the slave uprisings in Haiti and in other Caribbean islands, felt that the African slaves on their island would follow suit (13).

In Puerto Rico, the fear of slave rebellion was one of the major reasons for the transition from slave labor to free labor by the first half of the nineteenth century (Schmidt-Nowara 42). While the sugar industry did not take as firm a root in Puerto Rico, it was still an important source of income for the island. As a result, many landowners, in spite of the slave rebellions on other islands and the popular British abolitionist discourse spreading throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, clamored for more slaves (Schmidt-Nowara 40). On the other hand, many Puerto Rican intellectuals felt that the island was prepared to make the transition from slave labor to free labor, and that importing slaves would yield disastrous results. Still, the sugar economy suffered immensely in the 1850s due to the lack of workers, leaving the Puerto Rican government no other option but to propose the immigration of workers to the island. The debate regarding whom to import reflected the negative perceptions of blackness held by political leaders and intellectuals. Although many landowners saw the importation of African and Asian contract laborers as a potential means to revive the sugar economy, several intellectuals maintained that such workers would be a threat to Puerto Rican society. According to a report written to the Royal Economic Society of Puerto Rico, the idea of contracting African and Asian

laborers was seen as counterproductive to the advancement of Puerto Rican society. Instead, the report proposes the immigration of Spanish workers, who, in the words of the author, were “national, Christian, intelligent, and laborious”(as cited in Schmidt-Nowara 42). Being White, therefore, was linked to success whereas not being White was perceived as having a negative effect on the island’s social and economic growth. For this reason, the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico was considered by the elite as a logical and necessary step for the island’s economic success, and ultimately for its independence from Spain.

This anti-black sentiment was also present in other Caribbean nations. Having officially gained their independence from Haitian control in 1844, the Dominican Republic struggled to attain economic and political legitimacy in the eyes of its powerful Northern neighbors. Silvio Torres-Saillant, in his study of the concept of blackness in Dominican Republic, suggests that this need for legitimacy further cemented the Dominicans’ negative perception of blackness:

When in 1845 American Agent John Hogan arrived in Santo Domingo with the mandate of assessing the country for an eventual recognition of its independence, he sided with Dominicans in their conflicts with Haitians and therefore soon became concerned over the predominance of people of African descent in the country. Directing himself to the Dominican Minister of Foreign Relations Tomás Bobadilla, Hogan wondered whether ‘the presence in the Republic of so large a proportion of the coloured race’ would weaken the government’s efforts to fend off Haitian aggression. Bobadilla assuaged his fears by replying ‘that among the Dominicans preoccupations regarding color have never held much sway’ and that even former ‘slaves have fought and would again fight against the Haitians’ on account of the oppressiveness of the latter’s former regime. (Welles as cited in Torres-Saillant 127-128)

As demonstrated in the passage above, there was a definite distinction between Dominicans and Haitians. To the United States and Europe, the Dominican Republic was viewed as a White nation, while Haiti was undeniably Black. Therefore, Dominicans had to distinguish themselves from Haitians to ensure their success as a new nation. To this end, the island, along with many other Latin American nations, felt the need to “emulate the modernity and progress of these nations and [to accept] in broad terms the tenets of liberalism which saw in science, technology, reason, education and freedom of the individual the underlying forces of progress” (Wade 31). This meant that the nations not only adopted structures of government similar to those of their Western neighbors, but that they accepted to some extent the ideologies of race and ethnicity that prevailed in those areas.

During the nineteenth century, the already blaring anti-Black sentiment was fueled in the Americas by scientific studies that sought to demonstrate the natural inferiority of Blacks, Asians, and Indigenous peoples. It is noteworthy that much of the racism aimed toward people of color before then was based on the premise of religious faith; many Europeans and Americans believed that non-Whites were inferior due to their adherence to other faiths. The intellectuals of the Enlightenment Period in the eighteenth century attempted to dismantle the notion of racial hierarchy on the basis of religious belief by means of scientific inquiry and philosophical study. Such thinkers as John Locke and Montesquieu at this time were championing the idea that all human beings had access to natural born rights. Still, the existence of the Atlantic Slave Trade and continued exploitation of Indigenous peoples demonstrate that these rights were not thought to apply to everyone. According to John Jackson and Nadine Weldman, the justification for the enslavement of Africans was the idea that their society would never be as advanced as European civilization (22). The fact that most societies advanced would normally imply that the people of

those civilizations were virtually the same. However, given the success of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and the general acceptance of the view that African societies— after having been in contact with Europe over hundreds of years—remained seemingly primitive and backwards, the Europeans began to entertain the idea that they were different from Africans (Jackson, J. and Weldman 22). In the nineteenth century, scientists began to explore more concrete rationale for this fundamental difference. The sciences of phrenology¹⁴, paleontology, and anthropology, therefore, gained popularity during this period in both Europe and the United States. The creation of detailed human classification systems based on race not only intensified deprecation of blackness, but it also reaffirmed White supremacy. Scientists such as Lambert A.J. Quételet added to the work produced in previous centuries by Carolus Linneaus and Francois Bernier by using cranial and facial measurements to define and distinguish racial groups. Nevertheless, these categorizations always favored Europeans, making them the most advanced and civilized race (Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 46).

These beliefs regarding race eventually reached Latin America, where racial and political tensions continued to run high due to the unrest caused by the Independence Wars. Many Latin American thinkers such as Argentinian Domingo Faustino Sarmiento who had been formally educated in Europe and the United States saw these nations as models for their countries. Hence, they looked to the philosophies and scientific discoveries of European intellectuals as possible means to resolve the unrest in Latin America, and to ultimately be in a position to compete with Europe and the United States. The problem that many countries such as the Dominican Republic

¹⁴ Phrenology is a pseudo-science based on the assertion that certain areas of a person's brain are responsible for specific functions. Phrenologists believed that they could, by measuring a person's skull, determine the sizes of brain modules and therefore deduce the individual's personality. Such scientists claimed that human behavior could be understood neurologically rather than as a consequence of religious beliefs or environmental factors. Many phrenologists argued that different races had distinct brain sizes, and therefore possessed varying degrees of ability in certain areas. This allowed for the creation of a larger hierarchy of human excellence in which Europeans were on the top, and Africans and Afro-descendants were inevitably on the bottom.

and Cuba had, however, was the large number of Blacks and Indigenous peoples that lived, worked, and incorporated themselves in Latin American society in comparison to the relative small number of people of color in Europe (Wade 31). Unlike the United States, the Iberian slave system in the Spanish colonies allowed slaves to purchase their freedom from their masters. These newly freed Blacks intermarried with Indigenous peoples and Whites, producing a large mestizo population that influenced both Latin American culture and politics (Smedley 139). Furthermore, legally sanctioned miscegenation played an integral role in the colonization of Latin America during the colonial period. Historian Darién Davis asserts that “Spanish and Portuguese authorities often promoted miscegenation as a population policy in underpopulated regions” (xiv). Though some Blacks and Indians held important positions particularly during the Independence Wars, the supremacy of whiteness was still evident in Latin American society. Influenced by the racist ideologies of Europe and North America, the elite class generally viewed the working classes—which usually consisted of Blacks and Indians—as stumbling blocks to their nations’ success. Those individuals with darker skin were often subjected to harsh discrimination, and were therefore socially and economically disadvantaged. This mixture of races and cultures resulted in the creation of a color-based caste system in which Blacks were on the bottom, and economic status often served to improve or worsen one’s social standing. The idea of blackness, therefore, yielded to a flexibility that allowed many mulattoes, in the name of social ascension, to pass as White.

Nevertheless, the fact that most Latin Americans were products of racial mixture made matters worse for them with regard to the studies on race propagating throughout Europe. Many European scientists viewed people of mixed heritage as degenerate (Wade 31). To circumnavigate these complex issues, Latin American intellectuals adapted the racial theories to

accommodate their diverse population. Wade asserts that in Latin America, as well as in the Hispanophone Caribbean,

The racial determinism of European theories was often avoided and emphasis placed instead on the possibility of improving the population through programmes (sic) of ‘social hygiene’, improving health and living conditions. Lamarckian theories about the hereditability of characteristics acquired during a single lifetime were popular, since these held out the hope of lasting improvement of ‘the race.’ (Stepan 1991 as cited in Wade 31)

“Improving the race” usually was synonymous with “whitening” or *blanqueamiento*. The process of whitening generally involved the immigration of European workers to Latin America. With slavery ending in many parts of Latin America by the end of the nineteenth century, many Blacks, Indigenous peoples, and landless peasants left rural areas and went to the cities in search of work and better opportunities. The intellectual elites viewed this migration as a problem mainly because the presence of these classes made it very clear that Latin American society, in comparison to the European countries in which many of them were educated, was in great need of modernization. Having been heavily influenced by the philosophies and ideologies of Europe and the United States, these thinkers felt that bringing European workers and investors would not only advance Latin America economically, but it would also biologically set up their nations for success.

The early twentieth century brought about many changes in the ways in which the Latin American nations defined themselves. The desire for economic growth and progress led to an increased dependence upon European and American investors. While these interactions resulted in economic prosperity for some of the nations, several Latin American intellectuals such as José Martí and José Enrique Rodó feared the negative impact that American and European capitalism

was having on the their homelands. In response to this concern, these intellectuals proclaimed the superiority of Latin American cultural products and natural resources in an effort to dissuade economic and cultural overdependence on Europe and the United States. The notion of *mestizaje*¹⁵, or racial and cultural mixing, became one means by which these intellectuals sought to distinguish Latin America from the rest of the world. By the middle of the twentieth century, the notion of *mestizaje* had become so central to the Latin American collective identity that it came to be synonymous with the idea of Latin Americanness. Until the last decade of the twentieth century, *mestizaje* was generally accepted as a form of racial democracy. Several Latin Americans praised this concept of racial identity by suggesting that it was not exclusionary and discriminating like that of the United States. In fact, it has been shown that the concept of *mestizaje* has been influential in the dismantlement of colonial systems and modes of thinking in Latin American society (Miller 4). Still, within the last twenty years, researchers have found that, in some cases, *mestizaje* has simply served as a replacement for old colonial systems. Indigenous peoples and Blacks continue to be negatively represented in media and popular culture when they are actually made visible, and are often denied access to the opportunities given to those categorized as White (van Dijk 85, 139). Although Latin Americans are not victims to the same racial determinism that is found in the United States and can therefore move across the pigment spectrum as a result of a change in social or economic status, the preference is still toward whiteness. This is seen in the pejorative use of words such as *negro* or *indio* (Miller 4). Another negative consequence of *mestizaje* is that it homogenizes Latin American people, and does not allow for the celebration of African and Indian ancestry. Nevertheless, worldwide social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, have inspired a new awareness and appreciation

¹⁵ Miller defines *mestizaje* as “the genetic and cultural admixture produced by the encounters or ‘dis-encounters’ between Europeans, the Africans who accompanied them to and in the New World, indigenous groups, and various others who arrived in the Americas from regions such as Asia. . .”(1).

of African and Indigenous cultures.

Black Consciousness in Latin America

Although Afro-Descendants have appealed to government officials for decades for equal rights, Latin America has never had a Black civil rights movement (Sawyer 122). There are two theories surrounding this phenomenon. One consideration is that race is not as important in the realm of social categories in Latin America as it is in the United States (Sawyer 122). As seen in the previous discussion of mestizaje, nations have utilized the discourse of racial mixture and hybridity not only in celebration of Latin America's singularity, but in the interest of unifying people and therefore maintaining order. This brand of nationalism, to some extent, has served to diminish the saliency of race as a social category in Latin America. The other possibility, Sawyer notes, is that hegemonic powers have convinced Blacks and other marginalized groups of the divisive nature of racial groups in general (122). This theory explains to some extent the tendency of some Latin Americans to describe their identities in terms of nationality instead of race. Although there is little doubt that hegemonic forces have indeed impacted the nature of Black consciousness among Afro-Descendants, they have not altogether prevented the development of Black social movements in Latin America. In fact, Kwame Dixon asserts that while most of these movements began in the 1960s and the 1970s due to increased globalism and the impact of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, there is some evidence of the existence of social justice initiatives among Blacks even during and shortly after slavery (182). Some examples include the Haitian Revolution, maroon communities in remote areas during slavery, the Cuban Independent Party of 1908¹⁶ and various slave revolts in Bahia, Brazil (Dixon

¹⁶ The Cuban Independent Party was a political party founded in 1908 whose member mainly consisted of veterans of Cuba's independence wars who were black and mestizo. According to Esteban Domínguez,

182). Afro-Latin Americans also played a major role in the battles for independence during the 1800s, the national liberal parties in the 1800s and 1900s, and in the popular parties of the mid-1900s. Black involvement in liberalist parties contributed to the success of liberalism throughout Latin America, and eventually led to the election of many Black and mulatto presidents in the 1800s¹⁷ (Dixon 183). Blacks, many a part of the working class, also participated in labor union protests and formed mutual aid societies to assist the poor. Their active presence in these organizations helped to bring about changes that not only benefited their communities, but also the working class as a whole.

In nations with higher Black populations such as Cuba and Brazil, there have been initiatives to promote Afro-Descendant cultural products in the name of national unity. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, the artistic movement, Afrocubanismo, was the result of efforts by intellectuals to stimulate new interest in Cuban culture in light of the growing distrust of North American influence on the nation and political and economic unrest. This movement popularized Afro-Cuban music styles such as son and rumba all over the world, and helped to incorporate Black Cuban culture into Cuban national discourse. In the 1930s, Brazil officially recognized and provided national funding for African-based comparsas to perform during Carnival and on religious holidays (Andrews 168). The country also legalized capoeira, a form of martial arts initially practiced by African slaves, and celebrated it as an aspect of

the party “advocated an end to racial discrimination, land distribution, free and compulsory education, the right to trial by a jury that included blacks, opposition to the death penalty, an eight-hour workday and other social demands in the interests of working people irrespective of skin color”(213). The government eventually banned the party under the ‘Morúa Law,’ and its leaders were imprisoned. The law, established by Cuban senator Martín Morúa Delgado, made the creation of political parties on the basis of race and class illegal. Despite organizing a protest in 1912, the party was dissolved and several members were killed by soldiers in what is sometimes referred to as the “Little War of 1912.”

¹⁷ Some of these presidents were Bernardino Rivadavia in Argentina (1825-27), Vicente Guerrero in Mexico (1829), Vicente Rosa in Ecuador (1845-49), Joaquín Crespo in Venezuela (1884-86, 1892-97), and Ulises Heureaux (1882-99) in the Dominican Republic (Andrews 99).

Brazilian national identity (Andrews 168). These initiatives were motivated by not only a need to cement a sense of nationalism amid political and economic unrest, but also to appeal to an international mass market (Andrews 168). Nevertheless, interest in aspects of Afro-Latin American culture—albeit somewhat influenced by government attempts to attract foreign markets—brought greater visibility to Afro-Descendant communities.

Alliances between Black Hispanics and African Americans in the Arts also stimulated a degree of Black consciousness in the Latin America and the Caribbean. These interactions largely resulted from the Black artistic movements of the 1920s and 1930s. One of these movements, the Negritude Movement, was born out of a desire to affirm and define Black identity. While primarily a Francophone movement, the Negritude Movement caused Black intellectuals around the world to challenge European representations of their culture, while developing their own definitions of Black identity. This revisionist process coincided with the Black American Harlem Renaissance, Afrocubanismo, and the Negrista Movement during which many Afro-Descendant writers published works that celebrated Black culture, folklore, and history.

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the “New Negro” Movement, sparked a flowering of Black arts and literature. Writers of this movement believed that African American arts and letters must be born again to reflect the preoccupations of a new age (Favor 3). This new Black art would, in essence, create a platform on which African American artists could address issues of racial inequality (Guridy 109). The proximity of the United States to the Caribbean facilitated interactions between Black-American and Afro-Caribbean artists. These exchanges ignited an interest on the part of African American artists in the plight of Black Latin American artists who, like them, were also subject to racial discrimination in their nations of origin. Thus,

it was not uncommon for African American artists to promote the work of Afro-Latin Americans in the United States. Such was the case of Langston Hughes, who, having traveled through much of Cuba, advertised the works of such Afro-Cuban artists as poet Nicolás Guillén and sculptor Teodoro Ramos Blanco in his American publications¹⁸ (Guridy 107). These interactions would promote worldwide awareness of Black culture and social issues in Latin America. Furthermore, the privileged position of African Americans in the African diaspora made them a model for Afro-Hispanics to follow in their quest for racial equality.

The Latin American literary boom of the 1970s and 1980s would also spark international interest in Afro-Hispanic literature and culture. Dissemination of these works led to the development of scholarly texts and studies that explored social issues in the Black communities of Latin America. Scholars Miriam De Costa-Willis, Ian Smart, James Davis, and Edward Mullen have produced critical studies that have served to expand our knowledge of Afro-Hispanic literature and culture¹⁹ (Tillis, “Afro-Hispanic Literature in the U.S.,” 26). Black and Hispanic studies departments in U.S. universities have extended their programs to include classes and seminars on Afro-Latin American history and culture. This has not only resulted in greater interactions between Black intellectuals from the United States and Latin America, but also in the increased mobilization of Black Hispanics in North America and in their respective countries against racial injustice.

The 1980s and the 1990s were a turbulent period as many Latin American nations succumbed to political and economic crises. Populism, despite its promises of racial equality and

¹⁸ Langston Hughes was so enamored with the work of Afro-Cuban poets Nicolás Guillén and Regino Pedroso that he translated volumes of their poetry into English (Guridy 108).

¹⁹ Some examples include De Costa-Willis’ *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers* (2003), Smart’s *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin: A New Hispanic Literature* (1984), Davis’ “On Black Poetry in the Dominican Republic.” (1982), and Mullen’s *Afro-Cuban Literature: Critical Junctures* (1998).

fair wages, did not resolve the issues of unemployment and poverty in Black communities. This, however, did not mean that the situations of some Afro-Descendants did not improve; to some extent, Andrews attributes the growth of a Black middle class in Latin America to economic renewal plans proposed by populist governments (177). Still, noted discrimination on the basis of race and gender has resulted in the creation of Afro-Descendant social interest groups such as La Alianza Estratégica de Afro-Latinoamericanos and Organización Negra Centroamericana. These organizations seek not only to combat racial and gender oppression, but also to educate the masses about Black communities within their regions. Other organizations such as Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Negras Panameñas (Panama), the Afro-Venezuela Network (Venezuela), the Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians (Colombia), and Geledés (Institute for Black Brazilian Women) work to represent populations that are scattered and, as Dixon notes, “suffer from low levels of self-identity”(184). These non-governmental organizations operate on little funding and are often excluded from national discussions of racial and gender equality (Dixon 184). Nevertheless, their work has positively impacted Black communities all over Latin America by educating the masses about Afro-Descendant history and culture, and uniting Black interest groups across nations in the fight against racial discrimination.

In sum, the position of Afro-Descendant populations in Latin America has undergone a major shift in the last twenty years. Jean Rahier asserts that this change can be best described as a shift from virtual invisibility to incorporation into the state / government by way of political positions, the development of social welfare organizations and the creation of cultural interest groups (1). While the doctrine of mestizaje encouraged the celebration of the mixture between Spanish and Indigenous cultures in an effort to construct a national identity, it suffocated the expression of individual group histories and cultures. This exclusion was often at the expense of

Afro-Latin American cultures (Rahier 1). Nevertheless, several Latin American nations, in the interest of incorporating underrepresented cultural groups in government operations, have recently rewritten their constitutions and developed legislation that openly recognizes cultural diversity within their borders (Rahier 1). Many of these changes have targeted the interests of Indigenous communities since the Indian subject has, in many cases, become a symbol of Latin American identity²⁰ (Wade 32). Hence, Afro-Descendant groups, such as the Afro-Colombians of the Pacific coast, have often aligned with the Indigenous population in their nations in an effort to obtain access to government assistance in the preservation of their own communities (Rahier 3). Although Blacks in Latin America have made great strides in the area of politics, they remain subject to the highest levels of unemployment, illiteracy, and mortality in some nations. As a result, many immigrate to the United States in search of better living conditions. Acculturating to American societal norms—particularly in the realm of race relations—has proven difficult for Black Hispanics who, due to their phenotypes, are often confused as African Americans. This phenomenon has required Black immigrants to learn new standards of behavior that are linked to racist ideologies. These perceptions of race are anchored in the American tradition of institutionalized racism. The following section will provide a brief history of race relations in the United States that will serve as a basis for a discussion of the development of Afro-Latino identity in an American context.

History of Racialization in the United States 1700-1950

To further understand the development of the North American concept of race in

²⁰ Both Mexico and Peru saw the Indio as a symbol of national identity beginning in the early twentieth century. These nations created government departments that specifically handled issues in the Indigenous communities. In the 1920s, Peru recognized its Indian populations as legal entities and Mexico created academic institutions for the study of Indigenous cultures (Wade 32). Brazil also established an agency whose sole purpose was to aid in the protection of Indigenous groups (Wade 32).

comparison to that of Latin America, one must recognize that the system of slavery established by the British in the American colonies differed from that of the Iberian colonizers in several ways. The English system did not allow slaves to purchase their freedom. Due to the large number of slaves imported to the United States, the settlers feared what would happen if the Black population were to be set free. Thus, the American government did whatever they could to maintain control over the slaves. One of the ways it did this was by legally dehumanizing them. Richard Bailey notes that on bills of sale, wills, estate inventories, and other public and private documents, slaves were categorized as personal property (64). This attitude toward Blacks served as justification for slave masters who abused and mistreated their slaves. Additionally, there was no law in North America that allowed marriages between slaves, or between slaves and other Whites. Although the Spanish and Portuguese were concerned to some extent about the purity of blood and social standing, they did intermarry with Indigenous peoples and Blacks. The children from these marriages and unions were often acknowledged by their Spanish and Portuguese fathers, and, in some cases, they were sent to Europe to be educated and given access to inheritances. While unions between Black slaves and masters often took place in the American colonies, the children from these relationships were often sold to a different plantation from their mothers, or forced to work as slaves in the same master's home. Still, these children were rarely—if ever—acknowledged, and few of them were allowed to inherit the master's property. The fact that slaves themselves were not permitted to marry underscored their inhumanity, as well as the power of White society over Blacks. In controlling relationships between slaves, masters were able to sexually and emotionally abuse their slaves without guilt; many White masters felt that Black women were little more than breeders or concubines (Smedley 138). Furthermore, exerting such control made the slaves completely dependent upon their masters,

which, in turn, kept many of them from running away.

Despite measures to prevent slaves from achieving their independence, there were some Blacks that managed to do this. During the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), British troops contracted Black slaves to fight on their side in exchange for the right to become indentured servants instead of slaves. Some owners, acknowledging the hypocrisy of enslaving Blacks when they themselves were struggling for their own freedom, set free their own slaves (Smedley 209). Several Blacks secured their freedom by running away. The Underground Railroad, a network of secret pathways, safe houses, and caves, gave Black slaves the help they needed to escape to the Northern states, where by the mid-nineteenth century, much of slavery had already ended (Harris, J. 93). Though manumission of children born out of relations between slave women and their masters was not common, Iberian and French slave owners in predominantly Roman Catholic colonies were often obliged to acknowledge and free their mixed-race children, and in some cases, their mothers (Rodríguez, J. 296). With the increased industrialization of the North by the mid-nineteenth century, the New England states depended on slave labor less and less. As a result, many slave owners decided to free their slaves. To do this, however, required that the masters prove that their servants had committed an act that in some way had benefited society. Even upon manumission, slave owners were still legally responsible for their slaves. In accordance with the scientific theories about race previously mentioned, White leaders felt that Blacks were degenerate and predisposed to criminality and immorality. Large-scale abolition, then, was perceived as dangerous to the society at large (Rodríguez, J. 296). Furthermore, it was believed that without the care of White masters, Blacks were doomed to return to the savage behaviors that they practiced in Africa since blackness was often associated with darkness and sinfulness, and ultimately, the devil (Bailey 45). These negative connotations of blackness were

used to not only keep slaves under control, but also to subject free Blacks. The subjection of Africans and African Americans was not only legal and physical, but also psychological.

During the mid-nineteenth century, tensions began to grow with regard to the issue of slavery due to the exploration of lands west of the Mississippi River. While many Americans viewed the practice of slavery as unnecessary since the development of newer technologies were quickly replacing manual labor, there were some who feared the abolition of slavery. The reasons for this are varied. First of all, the Black population continued to grow with the slave trade. Although Whites still remained the majority, they knew that if the slaves ever decided to revolt, the result would be widespread destruction. Secondly, Whites—particularly men—feared that freeing Blacks would endanger the purity of White women. Though men had the prerogative of fornicating with female slaves without in any way losing their position in society, women did not have that same privilege. As previously mentioned, studies on race from Europe and the United States suggested that Blacks were predisposed to commit crimes such as theft and rape. Therefore, White men sought—in their subjection of Blacks—to protect White women’s sexuality. Finally, much of the South’s economy had grown dependent on slave labor. Since the majority of the revenue made in the Southern states came from the sale of agricultural products, Southerners felt that the economy would not survive without slave labor. Increased industrialization in the North led to the end of slavery in most Northern states by 1830.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation legally freed all slaves in 1863, the abuse and subjugation of Blacks in the United States continued. Following the end of the Civil War and the beginning years of the Reconstruction Era²¹, the governments of several Southern states instituted what was known as Jim Crow Law. These laws, passed from 1877 until 1965, not only

²¹ The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) was the period after the American Civil War in which the federal government would establish how the southern states that had seceded during the Civil War would be governed, as well as what rights the newly freed Blacks would receive.

served to keep Blacks and Whites separate, but they also ensured that African Americans would not enjoy the same rights as Anglo-Americans. The passing of Jim Crow laws did not happen instantaneously, however. Several court cases collectively known as the Civil Rights Cases of 1883 obligated the Supreme Court to reinterpret the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments²², both of which had been recently ratified. Each of the cases had involved unfair treatment of African Americans in public areas, namely trains, movie theaters, and hotels. The plaintiffs of these cases argued that the owners of these establishments had violated their rights as citizens, and that such treatment was reminiscent of a newer form of slavery in which Blacks had no say in where they could eat, lodge, etc. The Supreme Court ruled that in none of the cases was there any indication of slavery, neither was there any denial of anyone's rights. The justices concluded that the federal laws against discrimination only applied to the federal government, and not to private business owners and state governments (Tischauer 19-20). This interpretation of the law allowed business owners and state governments to legally discriminate against Blacks without any impediment from the federal government. Although Jim Crow laws had been established even before the court cases, the rulings mentioned above would legally permit the states to increase the severity of the laws.

Among the many laws separating African Americans and Whites, perhaps one of the harshest mandates dealt with the issue of interracial marriage. In 1884, all of the states belonging to the Confederacy—Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, North and South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Arkansas—had laws banning “miscegenation” or interracial marriage. The consequences of forming an interracial union—particularly those between a White

²² The Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution legally abolished slavery, and gave Congress the authority to enforce the law whenever necessary. The Fourteenth Amendment defines what constitutes American citizenship, protects American citizens from discrimination by state and local governments, and obligates state governments to provide just protection under the law for all their citizens (Gutman 134-135).

woman and a Black man—were harsh. The consequences of such unions ranged from declaring them void in the eyes of the law to imposing fines or imprisonment (Hodes 371). These punishments were mostly directed towards White women and Black men, thereby minimizing White men's sexual abuse of Black women. The reasoning behind this treatment was grounded in two commonly held stereotypes. First of all, many Whites believed that Blacks were not only intellectually inferior, but also that they were uncontrollably hypersexual (Farley 106). Hence, as previously stated, White men felt the need to protect their women, and ultimately the entire White race, from the sexual depravity of Black men. Secondly, Farley suggests the possibility that Black men were threatening to White men because the latter believed that the former had larger sexual organs (107). This, some White men felt, made Black men more desirable to White women. Fear of miscegenation and the need to protect Caucasian female purity have been considered the principal reasons for the reported lynching of Black men (Farley 106).

To add to this melee of fears, the concept of Social Darwinism had, by the late nineteenth century, made its way to the United States. This ideology “condemned miscegenation because interracial marriages often produced offspring with traits of the weaker race” (Farley 105). Despite measures to prevent racial mixture, there was a rather large population of mixed-race people in the United States. The problem was that, in some cases, it was often difficult to determine from one's phenotype whether or not he or she was of Black ancestry. It is also of note that, at this time, several mixed-race people were participating in politics and holding positions of influence. The fact that mulattoes with white features were able to eventually integrate themselves into white communities, and, in some contexts, served as links between Blacks and Whites in business transactions and in the promotion of political agendas became a major concern for Whites who were intent on maintaining their power. Therefore, to preserve White

supremacy, many states instituted what is known colloquially as the “one drop rule,” which clearly defined what was considered “black” or “white.” In 1890, the American government gave census takers the following instructions:

Be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattos, quadroons and octoroons.

The word “black” should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; “mulattos” those persons who have three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; “quadroon” those persons who have one-fourth black blood, and “octoroon” those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood. (Farley 106)

This system of classification, however, was difficult to use since it was nearly impossible for census takers to determine who belonged to what category. Furthermore, many mixed-race people with Caucasian features were often reluctant to acknowledge their Black ancestry in fear of being victim to harsh discrimination. Due to the problematic nature of the system, the Census Bureau ultimately decided in 1930 to eliminate the category of mulatto on its documentation, and asserted that all individuals of both Black and White ancestry be defined as “Negro” (Lee and Bean 39). Still, however, unless one’s ancestry was common knowledge, a person’s racial identity was generally determined by phenotype (since most mulattoes were said to have Negroid features). According to *The Diversity Paradox: Immigration and the Color Line in Twenty-First Century America*, “American blacks are the only group to which one drop rule has applied, and consequently, they are the only group for which the membership has been so tightly controlled” (Lee and Bean 40). The need to protect white wealth and purity, therefore, spurred the rigid delineation of blackness and whiteness in the United States.

The twentieth century brought with it a major shift in the American concept of race. Although the scientific theories concerning race became the basis of much of the racist

ideologies and laws governing race relations between Whites and Blacks in the nineteenth century, they were called into question in the following century. The rise of Hitler's regime in the 1930s, the subsequent genocide that resulted, and the fear of fascism with the coming of the Second World War caused some American people to reconsider the validity of eugenics. Europeans had not only used the notion of Social Darwinism as proof that Blacks and Asians were inferior, but they also applied this concept to the Jews. The systematic killing of the Jews, as well as thousands of other Europeans as a result of this brutal anti-Semitism demonstrated to both Americans and Europeans the problematic nature of racist ideologies and the frightening extremes that people can take them (Smedley 324). Sociologist Michael Omi asserts that the horrors committed as a result of fascism and anticolonialism in fact challenged the notion of White supremacy and biological concepts of race, and sparked an interest in some in dismantling the laws and racist theories that for centuries had prevented Blacks from enjoying the same rights as Anglo-Americans (244). While some Whites reacted to the events of the Second World War with a desire to change the current state of race relations in the United States, there were others who, in the name of Manifest Destiny, believed that they had been endowed with the right to dominate those belonging to the "inferior races" (Smedley 324). The latter group feared the integration of Blacks in their schools, businesses, and modes of public transportation, and looked to state governments to keep public services separate. Nevertheless, with the American government growing in power and influence over the states, Blacks themselves appealed to the federal government for the repeal of legally-sanctioned segregation. They argued that the public services—namely schools, restaurants, water fountains, restrooms, etc.—allocated to them paled in comparison to those of Whites. This period of protests and civil disobedience, known as the Civil Rights Movement, would cause a major shift in the perception of blackness and Black

identity in the United States and ultimately the world.

Despite the political and social changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for economic and political equality persists even today. Many minority groups—particularly African Americans—struggle with low self-esteem due to societal perceptions of their groups. To resolve this problem, Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups have created organizations that serve not only to protect and fight for equal rights, but also to foster pride in their ethnicity, history, and culture. In the years following the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, many African Americans turned to Black nationalist organizations such as Us and the Black Panther Party in an effort to defend their communities against the social injustices of police brutality and economic disparity. These groups were strongly Afrocentric and sought to create both in their members and in the Black community at large a sense of pride not in being the descendants of slaves, but rather in having an African heritage that existed long before slavery. During the Black Power Movement of the 1970s, Black men and women wore afros, braids, and African clothing and jewelry thereby negating White standards of beauty, and connecting the idea of blackness with African culture and tradition. This celebration and exaltation of African ancestry also inspired Afro-Descendants all around the world who, like African Americans, were and continue to be victims to racial discrimination and economic disenfranchisement.

Where Are We Now? : Representation of Black America After the Civil Rights Movement

In recent years, there have been two main responses to racial inequality in the United States (Omi 245). The first one has to do with politicians and lawmakers who, to lobby support from minorities and Whites, often take the view that there is no such thing as race at all. In

taking the “colorblind” stance, many leaders have failed to acknowledge and address the reality of social injustices in minority communities. Other Americans have made it a point to celebrate or embrace their racial identities or that of other people; nevertheless, given the importance that race has always had on the perception of a person’s identity in this country, any acknowledgement of race is sometimes misinterpreted as racism (Omi 245).

The emphasis on race as identity has resulted in the association of certain cultural characteristics with certain races (Smedley 8). Definition of racial categories and the physical, intellectual, and personality traits connected with them have aided in the proliferation of racial stereotypes, and have also negatively affected the way people of a certain race represent themselves. Joseph Phillips, an African American actor and activist, discusses the problematic nature of racial representation in the Black community in his work, *He talk like a white boy: Reflections on Faith, Family, Politics, and Authenticity* (2009). In the following passage, Phillips addresses the conflicts that come with the self-representation of African Americans in American society:

The cultural traits so often ascribed to us seem so superficial. Unlike other peoples who would be described as literate, business-minded, or ambitious, we are relegated to the back of the cultural bus where there is loud talking, lively dance, and bright clothes.

Worse, lists [lists of stereotypes associated with Blacks] such as this tend to become more than just innocent fun, they become currency on which our culture is traded. Fearful of being labeled “less than,” we rush to become authentic and in so doing we begin to define our culture downward . . . Doing well in school and reading books become anti-black, joining the debate club instead of the basketball team is anti-black as well, speaking correctly becomes “talking white” and thinking outside the accepted dogma is thinking

white. (27)

Interestingly enough, some Blacks have attempted to overcome the problem of self-representation by becoming “authentic,” or rather becoming *not White*. In other words, to be truly Black, then, means to reject the cultural norms of the dominant group. Since whiteness has been historically associated with success and Americanness, many minorities have assimilated to the norms that Whites have established to become productive members of society (Rowe and Malhotra 290). Assimilation, however, is the opposite of *realness*; for many minorities, ethnic and racial identities “have been and still are associated with authenticity and fidelity—in other words, with ‘keeping it real’ . . . [and] the chasm between the real and the fake point[s] to another set of binary oppositions: the hipster and the square. . .”(Ramírez 8-9). In trying to be authentic, some Blacks have perpetuated the very stereotypes that African American activists, politicians, and community leaders have fought to dismantle.

On the other side of this issue are the negative connotations of blackness prevalent in American society. A person can find any number of books that promise to teach them how to “talk Black,” or to speak Ebonics. The ability to speak in this manner, however, is connected with intellectual inferiority, sexual promiscuity, and criminality (Lakoff 240). Even Black activist Jesse Jackson has determined that speaking Ebonics is a sign of ignorance. Conversely, a Black person that “talks White” is one who speaks proper English (Ogbu 116). The connection of certain attributes with a particular race is problematic because it fails to take into account the effect one’s environment, family, upbringing and education may have on his or her personality or self-concept. It also homogenizes individuals with a wide variety of phenotypes, backgrounds and cultures into one racial group; such is the case of African Americans and Hispanic Americans (Smedley 8). Furthermore, rigid delineations of race do not allow for the definition of

people with mixed-races. In Latin America, there are several descriptive words that one can use to refer to a person's race such as *trigüño*, *moreno*, *indio*, *mestizo*, etc. A person, therefore, can move from one term to another depending on where he or she lies on the color spectrum²³ (Smedley 9). North Americans do not enjoy this same flexibility; in fact, race is a static, immutable phenomenon that one cannot transcend. Nevertheless, the recent increase in the numbers of Latin Americans to this nation has led to the reassessment of problematic perceptions of race and identity. The following section will address this phenomenon as it relates to the case of Afro-Latinos. Despite only comprising a small percentage of the American population, this group has recently become a central focus in academic studies and conversations about race relations in the U.S. and Latin America.

Afro-Latinos or African Americans? – the Afro-Latino/a Place in Historical and Modern Discussions on Race

Having discussed the development of Black consciousness movements in Latin America and the United States, it becomes possible to examine the inclusion of U.S. Afro-Latinos in American and Latin American historical discourses and in current discussions on the saliency of racial identity. The legitimization of any culture / identity is contingent upon the existence of a group history. The privilege of a history, as indicated by the first epigraph, is something that has traditionally been denied to the Black American. This situation, however, has improved to some extent as studies on African American culture have incorporated U.S. Blacks into national

²³ According to a study on racism in Latin America performed by the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) or CEPAL, the racial classifications of people in Latin America is based on a color continuum that is not merely centered on physical appearance or ancestry. In countries such as Brazil and Venezuela, other criteria such as education level and income also play a role in the way a person may perceive him or herself, as well as how others may identify the person (34).

historical discourses. The expansion of Black social movements in Latin America, scholastic interest in Afro-Latin American history and culture, and the growth of the Latino population in the U.S. has resulted in a growing interest in the contributions that U.S. Afro-Latinos have made to American society and culture. Recent reassessment of certain historical documents has uncovered evidence of an Afro-Latino presence in American history. Esteban el Negro, assistant to the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca, is considered one of the first Afro-Descendants to traverse North America. He, along with several other Afro-Descendants, was partly responsible for the advancement of the Spanish explorers into the United States (Forbes 27). The Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Alfonso Schomburg is credited with the curation of Afro-Descendant artifacts. His collection is one of the largest existing compilation of Black cultural artifacts in the world, and is now located in the Schomburg Center for Research of Black Culture in Harlem. Aside from his contributions to the preservation of Black culture, Schomburg played a major role in the Puerto Rican Independence Movement and was vocal in the fight against racial discrimination in the United States (Hoffnung-Garskof 70-72).

Afro-Latinos also played an instrumental role in the Civil Rights Movement. Afro-Cuban Evelio Grillo fought in World War II alongside African American soldiers in the 823rd Engineer Aviation Battalion. According to Lindsey Graham, Grillo's stint in the Army "nurtured his desire to serve as an activist later in life, volunteering with many organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Negro Political Action Association and the Mexican-American Political Association" ("Evelio Grillo"). Upon discharge from the military, Grillo became a community relations consultant in Oakland, California, and was the first Black employee to be hired in the city manager's office. The activist / judge would later work for President Carter's Administration in the late 1970s as an executive assistant for Policy

Development in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Grillo's work as a advocate for the African American and Mexican communities in Oakland would establish him as a bridge between U.S. Blacks and Afro-Latinos. In 1940, Afro-Dominican Carlos Cooks founded the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, an organization whose purpose was to educate and to unify Afro-Descendants across continents (Van Deburg 84). Inspired by the work of Jamaican Black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, Cooks would go on to organize "Buy Black" initiatives that would strengthen African American businesses and thereby encourage self-sustaining Black communities (Rivera 217). The Harlemit's disdain for the use of relaxers by African American women and his praise of Black feminine beauty would make him a forerunner of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s (Jiménez Román and Flores 8). Furthermore, his tenets on Black financial empowerment would serve as inspiration for many Civil Rights leaders, including Malcolm X.

During the 1960s and 1970s, cooperation with African Americans was a common tactic for Afro-Latino activists who not only sought racial equality for the Latino communities, but also for their homelands. Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán, a leader of the Young Lords Party, credits the Black Panther Party for paving the way for Latinos in the struggle against racial discrimination in his essay "Before People Called Me a Spic, They Called Me a Nigger"²⁴ (237). He also affirms the importance of alliances between Black and Latino communities for mutual success:

We [Puerto Ricans] had to put up with snow, we had to put up with English, we had to put up with racism, with the general abuse of America. And we are gonna hook up with everybody else in this country who's fighting for their liberation—and that's a whole lot

²⁴ The Young Lords Party, founded by Jose "Cha Cha" Jiménez, originally started in the 1960s as a Puerto Rican street gang in Chicago. It was formally established as an organization in 1968. Created with the same militant spirit of the Black Panther Party, the organization sought the social and economic advancement of the Puerto Rican community.

of people. We know that the number-one group that's leading the struggle are Black people, 'cause Black people –if we remember the rule that says the most oppressed will take the vanguard role in the struggle—Black people, man, have gone through the most shit. Black people, along with Chicanos and native (*sic*) Americans, are the greatest ally we can have. (Guzmán 237)

The symbiotic relationship between Black Americans and Black Latinos continues even today as racial tensions linger in American society. The reality of discrimination within the Latino community has fostered for Afro-Latinos a greater sense of community among Black Americans than with other Hispanic Americans. While this cooperation has proven beneficial for both groups, Afro-Latinos often find themselves culturally isolated in the African American community due to their Latino heritages. This sense of displacement has led many Afro-Latinos to create social media forums, blogs and organizations that address the problem of discrimination among Latinos while celebrating Black culture and history. One of these forums, Afro-Latin@ Forum, seeks to increase the visibility of Afro-Latinos via blog discussions and sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The forum also fosters unity between African Americans and Afro-Latinos through the organization of public discussions and conferences about the current state of relations between Black Americans and Latinos and the mobilization of African American and Afro-Latinos in the fight against racism.

The publications of such studies as Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores' *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), George Reid Andrews' *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (2004), and Marta Vega, Marinieves Alba, and Yvette Modestin's *Woman Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora* (2012) have challenged canonized historical discourses of both the U.S. and Latin America by emphasizing the importance of Afro-Descendant contributions to the construction of

their respective nations. Thanks in part to the research offered in these scholarly texts, academicians are turning more of a critical eye toward current perceptions of racial identity. It is hoped that increased exposure of the plight of Afro-Latinos in the academic world will continue to foster cultural pride among Black Hispanic Americans, while advancing a view of race that is more in step with the reality of America's diverse population.

CHAPTER TWO – CUANDO EL FUKÚ ERES TÚ: INTERSECTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND RACE IN JUNOT DÍAZ’S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO* (2007)

“A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.”

--Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952:18)

“To switch codes is to enter or leave one nation for another by merely releasing a foreign sound, a word, a grammar tic, slipping into an always borrowed and precarious language.”

--Doris Sommer, Introduction to *Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations* (2003:7)

“You just create this entire language, and in some ways, it holds you together longer than even your physical presence.”

--Junot Díaz, “In Darkness We Meet: A Conversation with Junot Díaz” (2008:14)

In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, theorist and novelist Antonio Benítez-Rojo asserts that “[t]he Caribbean space . . . is saturated with messages—‘language games’ . . . sent out in five European languages (Spanish, English, French, Dutch and Portuguese), not counting aboriginal languages, which, together with the different local dialects . . . complicate enormously any communication from one extreme of the ambit to another” (2). This cacophony of voices and cultures, the result of hundreds of years of colonialization, is one of many obstacles to the theorization of a concrete Caribbean identity. To some extent, understanding one’s language is, in essence, a looking glass through which one’s culture can be examined and defined. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Benítez-Rojo describes Caribbean identity as a chaos of histories, peoples, and cultures which, by virtue of the processes that serve to construct these entities, gives rise to permutations and continuities that bridge the island nations (81). While the purpose of this analysis is not to attempt to navigate the troubled waters of Caribbeanness, a recognition of the diversity of expression in the Caribbean will assist in answering the following questions: What are “language games” and how is this type of play used? More specifically, how does the way that one plays with language help determine

or define his or her nationhood? This chapter will focus on these questions as they relate to linguistic manifestations of Afro-Latinity perpetuated in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Afro-Dominican writer Junot Díaz.

Set in both New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, the novel tells the story of Oscar de León, an overweight Dominican youth whose primary ambitions are to find the love of his life and write. Yunior, the principal narrator of the novel and Oscar's closest friend, explains that one of Oscar's main issues is that he is a social pariah due to his inability to fulfill the cultural expectations of the typical Dominican male: "Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (24). Aside from his failed attempts at romance, Oscar is plagued with the curse of neither finding acceptance with neither Latinos nor with other Americans due to his Afrocentric appearance and what Yunior describes as "adolescent nerdliness"(23). The narrator attributes Oscar's difficulties to a curse—the fukú—that has arrived in the New World by way of European colonization of the Antilles. This curse, which will be discussed later, has not only affected Oscar, but it has inevitably shaped the lives of the entire de León family.

During his high school years, the only friends that Oscar has are his sister Lola who refers to him as Mister, and fellow nerds Al and Miggs. To assuage his pain and loneliness, Oscar fantasizes about women, engages in role-playing games with his friends and writes sci-fi fantasy novels. Nevertheless, these hobbies do not always prevent Oscar from retreating into periods of deep depression. This extreme hopelessness later leads him to attempt suicide by jumping off a train bridge in New Brunswick.

Surviving the fall, Oscar recovers and graduates from Rutgers University. Upon graduation, he secures a job working as a teacher at his old high school, Old Bosco Tech. There, he meets another teacher, Nataly, with whom he falls deeply in love. When she moves away, Oscar falls into a deep depression once again. Three years later, Oscar decides to go with his family on a trip to the Dominican Republic. Once on the island, he falls in love with a retired prostitute, Ybón, with whom he pursues a romantic relationship. This venture, however, proves unsuccessful when Ybón informs Oscar that she has a boyfriend who is captain of the national police force. Irrespective of Ybón's warnings, he continues to visit and spend time with her. One night, while driving Ybón home after one of their excursions, the captain pulls them over. In plain sight of the policeman, she kisses Oscar for the first time. This results in Oscar being kidnapped and beaten nearly to death in a canefield. Once healed from his injuries, Oscar's mother demands that he return home to New Jersey. His love for Ybón does not allow him to remain in New Jersey for long, and he immediately asks Yuniór to loan him money so that he can return to the Dominican Republic to pursue Ybón. After twenty-seven days on the island, Oscar is again abducted and shot to death in a canefield by two men commissioned by the captain.

Eight months after Oscar's death, Lola gets a package from the Dominican Republic with one of Oscar's manuscripts and a letter in which it is revealed that he had been able to enjoy an intimate relationship with Ybón. The letter also states that another manuscript will arrive that may provide a means to break the curse. Though this package never arrives, Yuniór is hopeful that he will be able to share the rest of Oscar's manuscripts with Lola's daughter Isis.

In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz uses a combination of erudite English, hip-hop slang, Spanish and Spanglish to chronicle the lives, loves, and failures of the De León family. This four-flavored

linguistic melee, in its own way, accurately represents the three strivings experienced by many Afro-Latinos who have traversed the Atlantic in search of a better existence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, U.S. Afro-Latinos possess three main obstacles that affect the way they view themselves, as well as the society in which they live. First and foremost, they must contend with the concept of racial identity prevalent in their Latino community. The perception of race in Latin America is quite different from that of the United States given that racial identities can shift based on several outside factors such as economic status and level of education. Still, Afro-Latinos do face racial discrimination in the Latino community, and often have to strive to affirm their Latino identities. An adherence to the Latin American concept of race in a North American context can be traumatic for Afro-Latinos who physically appear to be African American, and are treated as such. This problem describes the second issue. By virtue of their physical appearance, Afro-Latinos often face the same discrimination that African Americans experience. As seen in the situations of the Afro-Puerto Rican Piri Thomas and the Afro-Cuban Evelio Grillo (both to be discussed in the next chapter), some Afro-Latinos find solace, self-affirmation and social advancement in their identification with the African American community. Finally, there is a need on the part of Afro-Latinos to assimilate to an Anglo-American culture. Latinos, along with other minority groups in the United States, have the obligation to adapt to the norms and rules associated with Anglo-Americanness in order to achieve upward social mobility.

Díaz's negotiations and games with language exemplify these struggles, but also make light of them. While his use of Spanish and Spanglish represent a connection to the main characters' Latino identities, his ability to seamlessly move from hip-hop language and scholarly English demonstrate both a link to the African American community and to an Anglo-American space. This kinship with non-Latinos is also visible in the novel's use of footnotes; the need to

explain aspects of Dominican history and culture represents an effort on the part of the author to inform and instruct those that have not been exposed to the narrator's culture. The interplay of languages and historical pastiches has the effect of both distancing the reader from the reality of the characters and drawing him or her into the text. In this way, Díaz places the reader in the situation of an immigrant who both connects to and is often disconnected from certain experiences in the novel. This sense of belonging and not belonging at the same time provokes discomfort in some readers and therefore explains some of the negative reviews of the novel discussed later in the chapter. I also argue that the trilateral relationship between reader, text and narrator, and the narrator's linguistic and cultural code switching epitomize the Afro-Latino/a's struggle to affirm his or her multifaceted identity in a racialized space. An important step in this process of self-affirmation is the restructuring and rewriting of one's history. Laó-Montes asserts that

[d] espite local, regional, and national differences, this condition of exclusion from hegemonic definitions and history that imply a devaluation of memory, a folklorization of culture, and submission to political-economic regimes of racial domination and class exploitation frame a common diasporic ground for people of African descent in the Americas. (128)

The absence of Afro-Latinos in national histories in the United States and in Latin America is emblematic of the continued existence of racist mechanisms of power. For this reason, Díaz challenges current constructions of history and language with the intent of reconceptualizing Dominican history for a U.S. context, while making the case for the existence of an Afro-Latino community with its own unique history and culture. This is clearly demonstrated in the author's allusion to the poem "Adios, Carenage" by the West Indian poet Derek Walcott: "I'm just a red

nigger who love the sea, / I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation”(Díaz ii). The final verses of this poem provoke a questioning in terms of history’s impact on the Caribbean colonial subject: can Antilleans who have been indoctrinated in their colonizer’s language and culture be considered an autonomous nation? If the answer to this question is yes, is there a possibility for the existence of an Afro-Latino “nation,” and on what basis is that “nation” constructed? According to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, the vitality of a national consciousness rests in a nation’s ability to construct and disseminate a print-language (47). However, what happens when one community is subjected to another? What is said of the community on whom the language of another is imposed? To answer these questions, it becomes necessary to look at the concept of decolonization.

Subjecting Silences: Language Play as a Means of Resistance

One of the main characteristics of a nation or a community is a sense of political or cultural autonomy. In order to gain this autonomy, a group of people must in some way declare its independence or justify its singular existence to other nations, or, in the case of a colonized nation, to its colonizer. Once the nation establishes itself as “free,” its inhabitants must undergo a process of decolonization to establish in some way its autonomy and, therefore, assure its continuity. Frantz Fanon asserts in his treatise on decolonization, *The Wretched of the Earth*, that this process of ideological liberation requires an “encounter between two congenially antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation” (Fanon 2). One of the areas in which this encounter has

historically taken place in several previously colonized nations has been in the domain of language.

The battle for linguistic autonomy has been a struggle that has defined both the African American and the Antillean experience. Although nations such as Haiti have established their former colonizer's language as their national language, many of their inhabitants speak a distinct dialect or tongue that, while it may resemble that of the mother country, has its own grammatical and semantic structure. Several literary masters, with the intent of creating a *national* literature, have posed the question of whether they should use the language of their colonizers or if they should write in their native tongues instead. This issue was of special importance to the writers of the Negritude Movement who, in the 1930s, sought to challenge caricatured representations of blackness with the intent of creating their own Black aesthetic. The Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor called for the use of African languages in Negritude poetry at a conference in Dakar in 1937 (Thompson 325). Although he never followed his own advice, he did incorporate some words from his native tongues—Serer and Wolof—in his work. Kamau Braithwaite advocated the use of nation language as an alternative to Standard English in his writing (Pollard 86). The Barbadean poet defines nation language “as the common Anglophone speech of the Afro-Caribbean folk” and differentiates it from Standard English in terms of its syntax (Pollard 86). Martinican-born Aimé Césaire did not speak an African language yet penned words and created meters to suggest the presence of Africa in their poetry (Thompson 325). Nicolás Guillén, often used neologisms and onomatopoeia in his portrayals of the everyday lives of Black Cubans in such poems as “Canto Negro” and “Sensemayá.” The Cuban poet's work challenges official linguistic construction because it “render[s] a revolutionary verbal linguistic

pattern that inscribes a marker of cultural and ethnic identity, while addressing the complexities of poverty and marginalization among Black Cubans” (Tillis, “Afro-Cuban Literature,” 63).

African American writers also struggled with the issue of language as they sought to represent Black American culture in their works. Since these writers could not lay claim to an African language, they chose to appropriate the English language—a tongue imposed upon their ancestors—so as to create a form of Black folk expression. In writing in the Black vernacular, African American writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston preserved an aspect of Black American culture that had not been widely explored. According to the literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Black writing . . . served not to obliterate the difference of race; rather the inscription of the Black voice in Western literatures has preserved those very cultural experiences to be repeated, imitated, and revised in a separate Western tradition, a tradition of Black difference” (qtd. in Ashcroft 73). The act of appropriating the language of the colonizer permitted Black writers who had minimal ties to Africa to reconstruct a sense of identity and singularity that racism threatened to obliterate. Moreover, it is of note that Black Vernacular English is often considered to be a deconstruction of Standard American English. African American thinker bell hooks affirms that although enslaved Africans in the United States initially viewed English as the language of the oppressor, they began to regard it as a “potential site for resistance” and learned it as a means to reclaim their sense of identity within a restrictive space (256). She goes on to remark that “[e]nslaved Black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language [and] they put together their words in a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English language” (256). By transforming and destabilizing the colonizer’s language, the Black slaves were able to develop not only a sense of self while in an oppressive state, but also a unique voice.

A similar approach marks the way Junot Díaz plays with language in his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. This game is indicated even in the title character's name; Wao is a Dominicanized pronunciation of Oscar Wilde, whom the protagonist is said to resemble.²⁵ The author's choice to incorporate multiple languages in the text illustrates his need to relate a story that, due to the circumstances that have worked together to create it, cannot be told in one language. In an interview with David Shook and Armando Celayo, Díaz remarks that while learning English at a young age, he realized that the truly acquiring the language involved learning several different vernaculars (14). One has not only to know the standard rules in speaking, but he or she must also recognize slang terms, pop culture references and general sayings. The process of acquiring a language, therefore, involves learning much more than linguistic nuances, but also cultural references (Smith 118).

The story that Díaz writes in *Oscar Wao* is one of a family of immigrants who throughout history struggle to find their place despite being in a perpetual state of displacement due to their racial, linguistic and ideological backgrounds. These characters, in essence, must learn to negotiate differences in a society that regards them as others, and therefore does not welcome them with open arms. Oscar, the main character of the novel and “black sheep” of the family, faces the most difficulty in navigating the troubled waters of life in the States. Caught between two distinct sets of expectations—familial and societal—Oscar attempts to find happiness and true love without compromising who he is. What he fails to realize, however, is that the very eccentricities that make his life difficult and brief are mere constructions of a historical process

²⁵ Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Irish writer and poet whose work and personal style impacted the fashion and art of his day. While he is mostly celebrated for his plays, he is also remembered for the circumstances behind his imprisonment. He was arrested for sodomy and gross indecency after it was discovered that he had been engaged in a sexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the powerful Marquess of Queensbury. Oscar earns the name while at a Halloween party; some of the attendees remark that his costume makes him resemble the author. That Oscar Wao shares a name with this writer is not coincidental; both share in the experience of discrimination and marginalization.

known as *fukú americanus*. As Díaz points out, this “fukú” or curse is tied to historical events that are the direct result of colonization and expansionism (e.g., the arrival of the Spanish to the island of Hispaniola, the enslavement of Africans, the caudillismo of the Dominican dictator Trujillo, of U.S. foreign policy and, most importantly, diaspora).²⁶ If the process of colonization involves the need for domination and control, the goal of decolonization then must be to challenge colonial systems. If Oscar’s story is to function as a counterspell, or a “zafa” as the narrator of the novel suggests, then the languages, codes, and communicative devices in which the story is written must break with societal norms in order to imagine the possibility of an autonomous community. The use of multiple languages in connection with or as an interruption to what people deem to be proper forms of speech pulls the reader out of his or her comfort zone, and forces him or her to switch codes in order for him or her to understand the text. This writing style is representative of the “diasporan peoples’ double consciousness, an inevitable dualism expressed as their adopting and questioning centrist colonialist symbols” (Szwed and Abraham qtd. in Griffith 116). This duality is constructed on the basis of an awareness of self and a subsequent alienation that manifests as language play (Griffith 116).²⁷ The type of language play that Díaz engages is a reversal of the process by which he acquired English: “When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English,

²⁶ *Caudillismo* refers to a type of government in which a leader exercises absolute power over a nation. Usually established in times of crisis or transition, this form of leadership is common among rising military leaders like Trujillo. The *caudillo* engenders a sense of trust in his people by portraying himself as a benevolent patriarch who has his people’s best interest at heart.

²⁷ Language games among Afro-Descendants have been linked with the concept that utterances have the power to change things. Words, then, are magical, living entities with transformative properties. According to Griffith, diasporan peoples brought into the New World magical traditions so that “oracular resources were converted to channels through which the folk configured powerful symbols to appeal for divine help, express wisdom, curse adversaries, perform healing rituals and so on” (116). The functions of these incantations often overlapped; for instance, what might be considered a game could carry the tone of a curse (Griffith 116). Therefore, language play can also have serious undertones. Such games can also be used to humiliate or to procure vengeance (Griffith 116).

forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 904). By writing in this way, Díaz is able to awaken the reader to the immigrant experience and to the complex reality of the marginalization that Afro-Descendants must face. Part of this marginalization has its root in anti-black ideologies stemming from not only the Colonial period, but also from the nationalist discourse of the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo.

Language in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961, used language both to subject and to unify the Dominican people²⁸. The ability to speak Spanish in the Trujillo Era was both an indicator of one's Dominicanness, and one's allegiance to the dictator²⁹. It was also

²⁸ In part, the novel captures the period of extreme repression under the regime of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. Born in 1891 to a lower class family in a village known as San Cristóbal, Trujillo was a military man of Spanish, Creole, and Haitian descent who grew in power and influence during the U.S. occupation of the island nation beginning in 1916. Literary critic Ignacio López-Calvo asserts that the caudillo had a reputation for being "cold-blooded, eccentric, megalomaniacal, and openly nepotistic"(11). These attributes not only allowed the army chief turned dictator to maintain his control over the Dominican people, but they also inspired fear in those who dared to oppose him overseas. By creating the image of the paternal leader seeking to protect those under his authority, Trujillo and his supporters were able to silence opposition to the regime within the nation, and to "compensate for the numerous breaches in the supposedly democratic system of the country"(López-Calvo 12).

²⁹ Taking place in 1937, the Parsley Massacre was initiated as part of an executive order given by Trujillo with the intent of purging the Haitian influence from Dominican territory. For the young dictator and for other Dominicans, the Haitians represented a threat not only to the nation's security and economic growth, but also to their cultural identities. Due to the close proximity of the two nations, Trujillo and his supporters feared the possibility of another Haitian occupation. Adding to the ruler's paranoia was the strong presence of rayanos, or people mixed with both Haitian and Dominican blood, living along the towns between the two countries. These people often spoke kreyòl as their first language, were practitioners of the voodoo religion, used Haitian currency, and cultivated much of the land on the proposed border region. Trujillo, who had around the mid-1930s initiated a nationwide rebuilding project to fortify the Dominican economy and to attract international investors, believed that the rayanos were stumbling blocks to his plan to modernize the nation. This frustration regarding the presence of the landowners, coupled with Trujillo's own prejudice toward Haitians served as raw materials for one of the most gruesome acts of genocide in human history. Not only did the order result in the murders of thousands of Haitian plantation workers and landowners, but it also led to the deaths of several Dominicans of Haitian ancestry. Since there were also dark-skinned Dominicans that resembled Haitians

the means by which Trujillo created a sense of belonging and pride among the people. Language, therefore, has the dual purpose of bringing together and dividing.

Forced linguistic assimilation has been used as a means to stifle cultural expression of minorities for centuries. Masked with claims of fostering national unity and creating better opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, the sanctioning of linguistic restrictions upon outsiders clearly demonstrates a universal fear of the unknown. Doris Sommers surmises that “[l]iving in two or more competing languages troubles the assumption that communication should be easy and upsets the desired coherence of romantic nationalism and ethnic essentialism” (11). Multilingualism creates uncomfortable circumstances and awkward silences for monolinguals. It is a phenomenon that underscores the existence of other cultures and other perspectives. In many cases, however, multilingualism is an unavoidable consequence of social and economic factors associated with cultural contact. For instance, the use of Spanglish in Latin American and American contexts has been problematic for people in both continents. The Mexican poet and thinker Octavio Paz once described Spanglish as “neither good nor bad, but abominable” (Stavans 4). Linguist John Lipski notes that Spanglish “is usually not associated with whiter backgrounds like the Southern Cone countries (Chile or Argentina) or Spain, ‘thus suggesting an element of racism coupled with xenophobia that deplores any sort of linguistic and

living in the border towns, Trujillo had to figure out a way to distinguish between the two groups. The dictator, having heard kreyòl his entire life, knew that Haitians had a difficult time pronouncing the Spanish /r/ and /j/ sounds. The word *perejil*, the Spanish equivalent of parsley, had both sounds, and was therefore used as a shibboleth to single out the Haitians. In essence, the ability to speak Spanish determined whether one could live or die. To prevent further dissemination of Haitian culture in the country after the massacre, Trujillo began an intensive educational and religious campaign in border areas, built new roads and highways to connect border towns to the rest of the country, and constructed houses along frontier areas in traditional Dominican style to modernize the area. Still, even these efforts were not enough to assuage the dictator’s fears of the Africanization of his beloved land. Trujillo established and enforced stronger restrictions on Haitians and other non-whites wanting to cross the borders. Border police were stationed in frontier areas to not only prevent non-whites from crossing into the nation, but also to disseminate propaganda advocating the doctrine of *dominicanidad* among the Dominican people.

cultural hybridity” (Lipski cited in Breidenbach 218). According to the literary critic Ilan Stavans, Spanglish is considered by many Hispanics in the United States to not only be the language of the lower classes, but also a phenomenon that threatens to contaminate their cultural identities (3). He goes on to suggest that the very existence of the argot is a consequence of the socioeconomic issues that plague the Latino community:

Only 14 percent of Latino students in the country graduate from college. The majority complain that the cultural obstacles along the way are innumerable: the closely knit family dynamic, the need to help support their family, the refusal to move out from home in order to go to school. . . And language, naturally: for many of them proficiency in the English language is too high a barrier to overcome. English is the door to the American Dream. Not until someone masters el inglés are the fruits of that dream attainable.

(Stavans 3)

Despite the negative opinions associated with Spanglish and of the socioeconomic factors that have engendered it, there are some Latinos who esteem the argot as “a positive affirmation of their ethnolinguistic identities” (Lipski cited in Breidenbach 218). During the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s, Spanglish was considered a symbol of pride, and served to unite Mexican-Americans in their fight for equal rights.

The novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a challenge to monolinguals due to Díaz’s incorporation of various tongues / identities. In an interview with the British online magazine *The Independent*, Díaz describes the prose of the novel as being “African diasporic, migrant, Caribbean, Dominican, Jersey boy. . . my building blocks. . . It’s more an interlocking chain than any one point” (Jaggi, “Junot Díaz: A Truly All-American Writer.”). While the author proudly acknowledges his Dominican heritage, he attributes his love of writing to his difficulties

with learning English upon arriving to the United States at the age of seven. Once enrolled in school, Díaz imbibed literary classics and sci-fi novels. Although he did not begin his formal writing career until he was older, his interest in the art began with his extensive letters to his brother who spent long periods in the hospital with leukemia. Writing, in essence, became for the author a means to talk about his experiences as an immigrant in a society that he describes as “competitive, and sometimes anti-Latino” (Díaz 2012). The author asserts that like most writers, his work has an intended audience. For him, this audience is the people with whom he grew up. Most of his peers were African Americans, Latinos, and Asians, and many of them were immigrants. Díaz capitalizes on this cultural interaction with the use of multiple voices in the novel. As with his first collection of short stories *Drown*, the author relates the immigrant experience by creating linguistic and structural gaps in the text. Therefore, while this analysis will focus on Díaz’s use of language, I will also explore how the structure of the novel works along with the author’s word play to show the simultaneous feelings of isolation and connectedness so commonly expressed in the Afro-Latino experience. Part of this process involves understanding the gaps that exist between the reader and the author/narrator. In the following section, critical reviews of the novel will be examined to assess where the gaps are, how the reader fills them in, and what the author does to create distance from or move toward his audience.

Llenando los “gaps”: Critical Reception of the Novel

Reviews of the novel are mixed. While most literary critics regale Díaz’s work with high acclaim³⁰, there are many in the general public that find the novel difficult to read due to the fragmented narrative and the author’s liberal use of untranslated Spanish. Despite the difference

³⁰ Junot Díaz was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

of opinion among literary critics and average readers, the general consensus is that the narrative of the novel is unique. One reviewer notes that the language of the narrator, though at times elusive, becomes less and less unusual as he continues to read the book: “This voice, which mixes street talk and dollops of Spanish with heavyweight nerd-speak and literary references, could easily have been a joke that soon got old. Instead, it starts to seem totally natural for the narrator to refer to ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier as “P Daddy” or say of Trujillo ‘T-zillo’ ” (Tayler, “Performance Art”). Although several reviewers praise Díaz for his no-nonsense style, there are others who find the mixture of languages unsettling. One reader on the popular Goodreads.com site remarks, “. . . I took two semesters of the language in college and yet I had no idea what characters were saying in many parts, because context didn't lend hints. . . But how difficult would it have been to translate the Spanish in footnotes? [. . .] Throw a gringo a bone.” (Anonymous reviewer, *Goodreads.com*). This type of reader frustration brings to mind the question: “To whom is the novel directed?” The use of untranslated Spanish in the novel is problematic for some readers, particularly those who are not bilingual. For this reason, some reviewers question whether *Oscar Wao* can be considered a novel for a universal audience. Marcela Valdes, a board member of the National Books Critics Circles claims that

. . . more than any other author writing today, Díaz sings straight to the heart of urban Spanglish, and he’s not waiting for outsiders to catch up. His Spanish is untranslated, as is his freestyle hip-hop slang. Clearly, he’s writing for his people—Dominicans on the island and around New York City—and as far as he’s concerned, everyone else is just listening in. (Valdes, “Spanglish fly”)

The readers who feel as if they are simply “listening in” are typically not Spanish-speakers. Some of these reviewers have been vehemently violent and have even made comments that one

would consider borderline racist. An author of the World Socialist Web Site posted a review of the novel that barely contains its indignation and frustration:

Yunior's voice belongs to an educated person, but he speaks in a working-class, Dominican-American dialect mingled with Spanish and elements of African American vernacular English. In and of itself, the dialect rings true, but it does not feel entirely plausible that an educated person, let alone a writer, would speak in this manner. Overall, Díaz's representation of Yunior's voice strikes one as posturing. In fact, one wonders why it was necessary to make a character out of him at all." (English, "Trying too hard in the wrong places: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*")

The suggestion that Yunior's language does not match his scholarly persona coincides with both Lipski's and Stavan's earlier comments about Spanglish being associated with the lower classes, and more commonly, with people of color. The reviewer takes it a step further, however, when she points out that the narrator does not speak as one who is educated. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the use of African American Vernacular English has often been connected to individuals of lower socioeconomic status, or, more pointedly, those who lack education. This review demonstrates how a reader's personal prejudices can often cloud his or her understanding and appreciation of a text. On the other hand, is it not plausible that Díaz intended this type of reaction? Could it be that he wrote the novel in such a way so as to create awareness of this type of response to the narrator's language? To answer these questions, it is necessary to revisit the question of Díaz's audience. As previously mentioned, the Dominican author stated in a NPR interview that the novel was directed toward the African Americans, Asians, Dominicans and other Latinos with whom he grew up in New Jersey. He further remarks that though there are aspects of the text that may be indiscernible to some people, his readers are often willing "to put

up with a lot of gaps if they believe in your story and they believe in your characters”(NPR interview, September 2012). If this is the case, why then are some of these readers not able to “fill in the gaps”? How wide exactly are these “gaps”?

Educators Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese assert that in many western countries, “a dominant ideology that positions the majority language (often English) as the only language of communication in institutional and other public contexts is constantly produced and reproduced”(27). Minority languages are often thought of as inferior in order to maintain a level of homogeneity; sameness is, in essence, the cornerstone on which nations are built. Multilingualism of ethnic minorities, therefore, is not only uncomfortable because it is indicative of difference, but rather because it often excludes those of the majority group. This explains the distancing effect that Díaz’s language play creates among some readers who do not in some way embody the cultures to which the author consistently refers. While some readers are able to understand parts of the novel by virtue of their experiences and their identification with the cultures that Díaz mentions, there are others who feel a sense of being excluded from a conversation that they think, in some way, has to do with them.

On the other hand, one must take into consideration the negotiations that the author must make in order to communicate his message. Debra Castillo notes that although Latino writers who publish in the United States typically use Spanish sparingly in their works, it is not uncommon for them to resort to their first language when communicating an idea that cannot be adequately expressed in English (156). In this sense, Spanish is used symbolically to allude to a specific cultural phenomenon that cannot be accurately referenced in an American context. An example of this is seen in the first chapter of *Oscar Wao* when Ana, one of Oscar’s love interests, informs him that she has decided to resume her relationship with her ex-boyfriend who has just

gotten out of prison: “He’s back, Oscar asked, like forever? Ana nodded. Apparently Manny had gotten into trouble again, drugs, but this time, Ana insisted, he’d been set up by these three *cocolos*, a word he’d never heard her use before, so he figured she’d gotten it from Manny” (40). The word “*cocolos*” is a slang term that was originally used in the Spanish Caribbean to refer to a non-Hispanic Afro-descendent. The term’s meaning later changed to include Afro-Latinos and Africans living in Puerto Rico, and is also now used in association with salsa music. In the context of the passage above, *cocolos* is used in a pejorative sense; although the word has been appropriated among Afro-Descendants as an expression of pride, it is still considered by some to be an insult. Ana is described as a *trigueña with bemba lips*—indicative of Negroid features—but she uses the term in reference to other Afro-Descendants. This explains Oscar’s surprise at Ana’s use of the word and his suggestion that it must have come from her boyfriend. Díaz’s choice of the term *cocolo* illustrates a need to express an idea that cannot be readily explained in English—the adjective Black fails in the sense that, in a United States context, it is generally used in reference to African Americans—and to portray complex race relations and issues of self-loathing among Latinos. Hence, for Díaz, Spanish creates a sense of place as well as a code through which he is able to express cultural phenomenon not readily accessible in an American context. Despite being problematic for some non-Spanish speakers, this code switching has a necessary function in the novel. In essence, it places the reader in the dual position of outsider and participant in the text, while creating the groundwork for the process of identity formation that Oscar undergoes throughout the novel.

Another aspect of the novel that proves troublesome to some readers and refreshing to others is Díaz’s conversational style. Tayler’s review admires the narrator’s raw biting humor. Yuniors voice is that of the Dominican macho who is educated, but who is not lacking in street

knowledge. His style of expression, in essence, is indicative of different facets of his identity and therefore of the ways in which he sees the world around him. This is particularly evident in the first chapter when he describes Oscar's nonexistent love life:

Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid, we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands. Everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it. His tío Rodolfo (only recently released from his last and final bid in the Justice and now living in their house on Main Street) was especially generous in his tutelage. Listen, palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y méteselo. That will take care of *everything*. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y méteselo! Tío Rodolfo had four kids with three different women so the nigger was without doubt the family's méteselo expert.

(24)

The conversational style that Díaz uses in this excerpt has both the effect of connecting the reader with the narrator, and distancing some readers from the meaning of the text itself. On the one hand, the text is interactive. The narrator positions the listener within the text with the phrase, "but this is a Dominican kid *we're* talking about." He also places the reader within a particular space. Although the blatant use of profanity is off-putting to some, such language also connects people to the reality of urban culture. The vulgarities that Yuniors use here are terms that are generally considered offensive. First, he refers to women as "bitches," which is a term that is commonly used to demoralize and objectify femininity. In this context, women are perceived as disposable objects for sexual gratification. This perspective appears as a stereotypical trait associated with Dominican men. In the ethnography *Making New York*

Dominican: Small Business, Politics, and Everyday Life, Christian Krohn-Hansen describes the relationships between Dominican men and women as paradoxical: “On the one hand, a man is expected to be *mujeriego*, a womanizer, engaged in sexual conquest even when he is married or living in a stable union. . .on the other hand, the man is also supposed to be a good husband and father, providing for his woman and his children”(100). The use of the term “bitches” in reference to women is also widely used in Hip Hop culture in which “women are often presented as men’s property” (Richard 98). The use of stereotypes and vulgar sexual language here serve primarily to illuminate an identifiable aspect of Yuniór’s cultural identity, and situates the reader within the narrator’s “streets.” It also presents the reality of one of many struggles that permeates the novel: the minority’s inability to fulfill societal expectations imposed upon him or her. The reader gets a glimpse of this in Yuniór’s description of tío Rodolfo. Despite being the ultimate *mujeriego*, he is also pejoratively stigmatized for his promiscuity and his inability to stay out of prison. Like Oscar and Yuniór, Rodolfo is, by virtue of his minority status, “caught in a tension between contradictory ideals” (Krohn-Hansen 100).

Yuniór also uses the word “nigger” in reference to Rodolfo. This term is often used as a sign of endearment and kinship among African American youth. However, when used by one who does not belong to the African American community either in general conversation or in reference to another Black person, the word can be viewed as offensive. Díaz appropriates the word and transfers such usage to a Dominican person. In the context presented above, it is probable that the meaning behind Yuniór’s use of nigger is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is meant to show a connection between Oscar’s family and the African American community. If Oscar and his mother are both described as Black phenotypically, then it is not too far-fetched to deduce that Rodolfo could also have Black features as well. What is also remarkable about the

position of the word “nigger” is its utilization as part of a wisecrack. According to Randall Kennedy, the term is not only used as a means to show kinship, but also to debase and patronize (qtd. in Lawrence 43).

Finally, there is the Spanish sprinkled throughout the passage. Here, the usage of Spanish is justified given the context of the situation. The power of the narrative lies in the text’s capacity to retain Latino cultural nuance, grounded in the way Spanish is used in the text. In the example above, the narrator uses the expression “méteselo,” which, in the context of the passage, is used in reference to a sexual act: “Grab a muchacha y méteselo.” The act that Rodolfo is describing is particularly violent; he blatantly tells Oscar to just take a woman and put himself into her. This is indeed not the romanticized love relationship that Oscar imagines for himself. Furthermore, it is again indicative of the importance of sexual conquest to the Dominican male ego. For those readers outside of the Dominican urban culture, this overt sexual language may be alarming. One blogger addresses this concern in her “Open Letter to Junot Díaz.” In the letter, the writer recalls the shameful online conversations that she has shared with her mother about the book:

Number1Mom48267: I have all these spanish words & phrases I have to look up
like meteselo with an accent over the 2nd e

me: meterse is to insinuate oneself into
I believe
no te metes en mis cosas is like don't get up in my grill

Number1Mom48267: the phrase is (to an adolescent boy): Grab a muchacha y meteselo.
It probably means "get into her" literally. . .

me: you hear this where?

Number1Mom48267: in the book I'm reading
one more: "without a speck of verguenza"

me: oh jeez are you reading junot diaz?

Number1Mom48267: yes, I am

me: vergüenza is shame
as in what I'm feeling right now ("An Open Letter," December 2007).

The author of the blog goes on to suggest to Díaz that if he is going to write a popular book that appeals to "suburban women who aren't Eva Longoria Parker" that he needs to provide a glossary so that she no longer has to have embarrassing conversations with her mother ("An Open Letter"). Although this is a hilarious, lighthearted commentary, it demonstrates how the raw, sexual language that Díaz can create problems for readers outside of the urban / Dominican experience.

Besides language, there is another main issue that immediately strikes the reader while engaging the novel: the novel contains a number of footnotes that attempt to explain aspects of nerd culture and historical references as they relate specifically to the events surrounding the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. These footnotes provide the context for the reader that, according to the narrator, "missed their mandatory two seconds of Dominican history"(2). Some of the footnotes are ahistorical; that is, the message is less about the historical event described, and more about the narrator's opinion of what or how something happened. It is also in these footnotes that Yuniors takes the opportunity to address his own criticism of both U.S. foreign policy and Dominican politics. For instance, in the first chapter of the novel, a footnote is used to explain the meaning of the the word "parigüayo," which is used to describe Oscar:

The pejorative *parigüayo*, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism

"party watcher."³¹ The word came into common usage during the First American

³¹ The Watchers are characters from the Fantastic Four comic book series. They are an extraterrestrial race stationed all over the universe whose primary function is to monitor what other species are doing. They were also once an advanced civilization whose objective was to spread its wealth of knowledge to other species. Unfortunately, they lost this privilege after the inhabitants of the planet Procillicus took the Watchers' knowledge of nuclear technology and all but destroyed themselves. As a result, the Watchers were forced to sign a treaty declaring that they would never interfere with other societies. Their main duty

Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.). (19)

It is of note that in the midst of the history lesson, there is a commentary on the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic, of which few Americans are aware. In insinuating that the reader would not know about the occupation of the Dominican Republic, the narrator is criticizing the United States Government for its imperialist tendencies and for its need to hide its exploitation of other nations from its own people. One could also argue that the criticism may be directed toward the American people who are not aware of what their government is doing. In either case, Díaz is giving voice to a perspective that is not normally heard in a U.S. context. This interest in U.S. foreign policy and history as it relates to the narrator's homeland echoes the concerns that many Afro-Latino writers such as Tato Laviera, Piri Thomas, and Arturo Schomburg have highlighted in their own writing. This narrator's preoccupation is particularly unique, however, in the sense that it perpetuates a common stereotype about Americans: that they are self-centered and acutely unaware of their government's activity. The fact that this criticism is written in a footnote and not as part of the main text is also important. Although the footnote gives the narrator space to express his opinion, it is something that is not obligatory to read. If a person understands the word in question, he or she has the option of bypassing the additional text altogether. Therefore, the footnotes in the novel simultaneously function as an optional tool and as a medium through which the narrator can express himself. Furthermore, the use of footnotes to explain Dominican history epitomizes the devaluation of minorities and their histories in the United States. The physical marginalization of the footnotes points to the marginalization of

after the destruction of Procillicus was to record the events for those that would come after the end of the universe (Alsford 135-136). The term "Watcher" is used quite frequently in the novel in reference to the narrator Yuniór. He, in essence, strives to tell the story that Oscar, due to his own destruction, cannot.

minorities. Even though Yuniors appears to be “setting the record straight” with his side comments, his in-depth commentaries are placed conveniently at the bottom of the page so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative and to permit readers to decide just how involved they want to get with the text and the characters.

Another issue that some readers have found disconcerting in the novel is the lack of separation between the English from the Spanish in the narrative. This form of language play is problematic for readers because it removes the exoticism from the Spanish words and places them on equal footing with English. For Díaz, the question of removing the italics is mainly a political issue:

. . .allowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotation marks was a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why 'other' it? Why denormalize it? By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English. . . (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 904)

By mixing languages, Díaz recreates the immigrant experience in his novel to help his readers empathize with the language battles that he himself had to endure. The Dominican author makes this perfectly clear in several interviews. What is not discussed at length is the Black presence in the novel. Although it is evident that the author uses African American Vernacular in his text, the main focus in analyses of the novel has generally been with the use of Spanglish and sci-fi and pop culture references. The intersection of race and language in this text and in the main character’s destiny as a result of his tragic melee of identities underscores the problematic nature

of multiple identities and multilingualism within the context of a racialized space. This issue will be specifically examined in the following section with particular interest in the author's presentation of Africa in his narrative.

Reversing the Curse: Language and the African Presence in *Oscar Wao*

In *Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz captures the alienation of the immigrant individual that seeks to gain his cultural and intellectual footing. While Oscar attempts to belong to the societies in which he finds himself (i.e., Paterson, Rutgers University, and even the Dominican Republic), his efforts often fail because he is considered an atypical Dominican man. The narrator, Oscar's ex-roommate Yunior, makes several allusions to the title character's oddness throughout the text. For instance, in the first chapter, Yunior claims that "Oscar was a social introvert who trembled with fear during gym class and watched nerd British shows like *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7*. . . and he used a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like *indefatigable* and *ubiquitous* when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school"(22). One of the aspects of Oscar's character that separate him from his peers is his language and his inability to negotiate register. In the same chapter, Yunior remarks that Oscar "could write in Elvish, could speak in Chakobsa, [and] could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai and a Lensman in acute detail. . ." (21). The languages that Yunior mentions here are not only imaginary, but they also belong to nerd culture, a culture that is commonly associated with White males. According to Christopher McDonald, nerds

tend to speak in "Superstandard English," a dialect comprising "lexical formality, carefully articulated phonological forms, and prescriptively standard grammar," which normally exists more as a written dialect than a spoken one. This together with a

tendency to dress in conservative or unfashionable clothes and maintain a stiff, low affect demeanor, lead geeks or nerds to be seen by their peers as “too white” or “hyperwhite.”

(183)

The fact that Oscar speaks such language automatically separates him from those within his peer group. His vocabulary is superior to that of the young people around him. Furthermore, Oscar’s language is a barrier for his Black peers due to the latter’s “hyperwhiteness.” According to anthropologist Arthur Spears, Blacks who talk, act or dress “white” are often rejected by other African Americans due to racism, the need to maintain a degree of insularity in the racial group, and to the pride of having survived adversity (108-109). Furthermore, the nerd culture to which Oscar ascribes is marginalized even within Anglo-American society. Not only is he an outsider within what may be considered his own racial group, but also among Whites as well.

Further complicating matters for Oscar is the fact that he has the kinky hair typically associated with African Americans. According to Yuni, Oscar “wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his ‘anti-pussy devices,’ Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them—sporting an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that him look somewhat retarded” (20). Oscar’s appearance brings into question the main character’s sense of Dominicaness. For instance, when Oscar decides to go to the barbershop to get his afro cut off, the barber is surprised that he is Dominican (30). The protagonist’s cultural identity is brought into question again in his first year of college:

There was the initial euphoria of finding himself alone at college, free of everything, completely on his fucking own, and with it an optimism that here among these thousands of young people he would find someone like him. That, alas, didn’t happen. The white

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

On the one hand, the White students do not fully accept Oscar because of his Afrocentric appearance. This rejection is not overt, however; one might say that Oscar is treated with a patronizing kindness. On the other hand, the minority students openly reject Oscar because of his demeanor and because of his language. His ability to speak Spanish, which is usually considered to be a means to identify a person as Latino, is not enough in this case. Oscar is double the outsider because his physical self and personality do not match. As Yunion remarks in Chapter One: "You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto...Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (22).

Although the narrator spends a great deal of time describing Oscar's unique ways, he does not regard them as a coincidence of nature. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator claims that Oscar and his family are victims of what he terms as *fukú americanus*. The phenomenon *fukú* functions in the novel as an explanation for the losses that both Oscar and his family have experienced over decades of living under the Trujillo Regime and later in the United States. The narrator's preoccupation with the concepts of *fukú* and *zafa* inevitably become the backbone and vehicle for the entire novel since these entities are historical processes that occur throughout the family's generations.

According to Paul Jay, the term *fukú* refers to a "New World curse." It is used to describe "a constellation of historical processes shaping the lives of displaced, mobile, transplanted,

rerouted people”(180). In colloquial Dominican Spanish, the word *fukú* is used to mean “curse” or “evil spirit.” In the Dominican Republic, *fukú* is known as *fucú* instead; the use of the letter *k* is an Anglicism that, like the Latinized term *americanus*, is used to demonstrate the transnational effects of the curse. Antonio Olliz Boyd in his work *The Latin American Identity and the African Diaspora: Ethnogenesis in Context* asserts that *fukú* has African origins and is a reflection of the integration of West African religious beliefs in Dominican culture (4). In most West African religious belief systems brought to the Americas by way of slavery, the Supreme Being is said to have given to each individual an *aché*, which is often defined as a life force, power, grace or blessing (Olliz Boyd 43). Orishás, or lesser gods, serve as assistants to the Supreme Being for the carrying out of one’s destiny. It is believed that a person’s destiny is tied to his or her *aché*; each individual’s *aché* has certain characteristics that predetermine one’s thoughts, feelings and personality traits. In the same way, one’s destiny can be connected to the *fukús* prevalent in his or her life, or, as in the case of Oscar Wao, in the history of one’s family. The opposite of *fukú*, *zafa*, is what is used to overcome the curse. In the Prologue of the novel, Díaz asserts that the book he is writing may be a type of *zafa*, or a counterspell devised to destroy the effects of loss and bad luck perpetuated throughout the history of the de León family, and ultimately the Dominican Republic. *Zafa*, according to the narrator, is activated by speaking the word and then by “a vigorous crossing of index fingers”(7). In many cultures, including Anglo American cultures, the crossing of one’s fingers is used as a means of counteracting what someone has said. It is usually employed in an instance in which someone is lying and wishes to deflect the negative consequences of the act (i.e., going to hell). The practice of crossing one’s fingers was a common one in the Early Christian Church during times of severe persecution. When one

crossed his or her fingers, it represented the cross, which was said to ward off evil spirits or bad omens (Ammer 144).

The idea of the novel being a zafa is significant for two main reasons. First, the story that Yuniór tells is filled with gaps. As T.S. Miller points out in his analysis “Notes from Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” much of Yuniór’s knowledge of the events of Oscar’s life come from the latter’s journals, letters and photographs that he admits to having acquired (99). However, even with the information gleaned from these sources and from Oscar himself, it would be almost impossible to create a complete picture of the de León’s family history. The narrator himself acknowledges this toward the end of the novel as he reevaluates the validity of his story and of the fukú he described at the beginning of the novel:

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you’ll have to decide for yourself. What’s certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail—they didn’t share their German contemporaries’ lust for documentation. And it’s not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything. The remaining Cabrals ain’t much help, either; on all matters related to Abelard’s imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more. Which is to say if you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it. Oscar searched for it too, in his last days, and it’s not certain whether he found it either. (243)

Yunior's remarks above point to the issue of fragmentation of Latin American history, a history whose traumatic effect and destruction has silenced its victims. No one has the full story because, as demonstrated in the case of Trujillo, its atrocities have remained hidden from view and its witnesses are too ashamed or too fearful to speak. Some details of Trujillo's regime and its effects on the island of Hispaniola have, until recently, been excluded from mainstream historical discourses because many of the dictator's orders were carried out with the aid of secret police and remain undocumented. For instance, historical accounts vary as to how many Haitians were murdered in the Parsley Massacre of 1937 because many of the bodies were either buried in unmarked graves, or thrown into the sea before daybreak (Andrews 150). Confronted with so many unknowns, Caribbean writers attempt to piece together fragmented narratives—the stories of the marginalized and of those subjected to the trauma of injustice—to construct what I define as an “alternarrative” from the ashes of destruction. As the Barbadian writer and professor Kamau Braithwaite proposes in his poetic trilogy *The Arrivants*, the Caribbean writer must call into question colonialist historiographies and aesthetics, and instead seek what he calls an “alter/native” to hegemonic discourses (Braithwaite qtd. in Edwards 2). His work, like many Caribbean writers, “signals a restorative philosophy of history and art which takes fragmentation, catastrophe and trauma as both the beginnings of and routes toward new languages of culture, place, nation and identity”(Edwards 2). The process of regeneration that Braithwaite describes involves a certain degree of poetic license since the story that is told is, due to its fragmentation, one that is filled with gaps. Going back to the passage above, it is evident that Yunior recognizes the holes in the story he tells, and excuses them by pointing out the fallacies of the hegemonic system he wishes to overcome. This, in essence, is the second important aspect of the *zafa*—“the crossing of the fingers”—that is mentioned in the novel's Prologue (7). Yunior metaphorically

crosses his fingers by removing from himself the burden of reliability; he has no choice but to work with the pieces that he is given, and is left to fill in the silences with his own interpretations of what happened.

Furthermore, it is significant that the African terms *fukú* and *zafa* are concepts linked to the cyclical concepts of destruction and renewal. If indeed Oscar's fate is linked to a curse that begins with the arrival of Columbus and continues with the unspeakable atrocities of Trujillo's regime, the only solution is to tell the story; as Yúnior remarks, the *fukú* itself would never leave a memoir. Although the narrator admits himself that much of his own story contains "páginas en blanco" (149), the act of piecing together a story from the silences allows for the creation of a new language—an alternarrative—that attempts to lessen the gaps that the hegemonic historiographies have conveniently left unfilled.

Brygida Gasztold posits in her analysis of language in *Oscar Wao* that the suggestion that Oscar and his family are under a *fukú* insinuates the possibility that this curse can be lifted (212). Moreover, one of the major tenets of most Afro-Caribbean religions is the idea that to be healed, one must return to the source of trauma. Generally, the root of the problem is found in a disturbed social relationship or in an unresolved conflict (Brandon 137). Hence, to break the *fukú*, one must start from the creation of the colonial system—the point at which the disturbed relationship between the colonizer and the colonized subject began—and dismantle it from within its own code. This process, as previously mentioned, involves a reversal of colonial structures of communication and documentation. One must often endure reproach and resistance for his or her efforts, for the enterprise of creating an alternarrative is a violent process. This phenomenon is epitomized in Díaz's transformation of the term *fukú* later in the novel as Oscar considers his relationship with the Dominican prostitute Ybón after having been beaten nearly to

death by the latter's boyfriend: "One day while watching his mother tear sheets off the beds it dawned on him that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be *true*. Fukú. He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you*"(303-304). The transformation of *fukú* to *fuck you* marks a turning point in Oscar's life and underscores the violence with which the new language that Díaz creates is formed. In the first case, Oscar decides not to end his relationship with Ybón even at the risk of losing his own life and of going against his family's wishes. The *fuck you* that Oscar mouths is, therefore, a conscious effort on the part of the protagonist to define his own identity in light of the constraints imposed upon him by this curse. Though he recognizes that he is indeed following in the cursed footsteps of his mother (Beli is nearly beaten to death for her allegiance to the husband of Trujillo's sister) and is openly criticized for doing so, one could argue that his intent to continue this idyllic romance is directly contrary to the Dominican machismo (hypersexuality with emotional disconnect) that his family has tried to impose on him since childhood.

With regard to the second issue, it is of note that this Afro-Dominican term is morphed into one of the strongest, most offensive words in American English. While the expression *fuck you* is often used as a form of dismissal, it can also denote a sense of fierce distaste. In addition, the connotation of the verb *fuck* is suggestive of a violent penetration without emotional attachment. In linguistic terms, the penetration of other languages—Spanish, Spanglish, and nerd speak— into dominant English discourse not only places them on equal footing with the latter, but it also functions as a physical representation of the ongoing concurrent processes of acculturation and transculturation that all immigrants must face. As Fanon himself puts it, "decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists" (*Wretched of the*

Earth 3). The clashing of languages in *Oscar Wao* is violent because it challenges normalized structures and codes within American English. This break from the “normal” causes discomfort for readers who are unable to establish connections between the reality as seen through the eyes of the novel’s characters and their own.

Finally, Díaz defies colonial structures by addressing issues specifically related to Afro-Dominicans and acknowledging the African presence in Dominican culture. As discussed in the previous section, Ana’s pejorative use of the word *cocolo* despite being phenotypically Black herself brings to the surface issues of self-loathing common to Afro-Dominicans who have themselves been victims of the same type of marginalization. Furthermore, the use of *fukú* and *zafa*—both terms of African origin—connects Dominicaness to an African heritage, a concept that political discourses such as *dominicanidad* have sought to obliterate. The author also alludes to deities from African syncretic religions when describing certain characters. Of Beli, Oscar’s mother, he writes: “. . .clearly: one of those Oyá souls, always turning, allergic to tranquilidad. Almost any other Third World girl would have thanked Díos Santísimo for the blessed life she led. . .Our girl had it *made*, and yet it did not feel so in her heart” (79). In Yoruba mythology, Oyá is known as the goddess of change, wind and storms (Olajubu 82). Possessing both malevolent and benevolent qualities, she is known as a woman who is like a man because of her power. Here she is used to describe Beli’s unsettled spirit and unfulfilled desire for something greater than herself. The presence of such deities in the novel contradicts Trujillo’s view of Dominicaness as solely White and Catholic, and attests to the significance of African culture in the Dominican Republic.

Conclusions: The Case for Afro-Latinity

The author's decision to utilize multiple discourses in his narrative is not coincidental. In an interview with Armando Celayo and David Shook, Díaz remarks that his use of language in *Oscar Wao* is connected to the reality of being an immigrant from a Third World country in an American context:

You know when you test cars or planes, and you put them through stress tests? Every language that I was deploying, every language system, fell apart . . . But science fiction, fantasy, and comic books are meant to do this kind of stupid stuff, they're meant to talk about these extreme, ludicrous transformations, and so I really wanted to use them. I felt a great kinship to these narratives, which served as a backbone for so much of what we call "America" but are completely ostracized; it felt like the history of the immigrant, the minority, the woman. (15)

The juxtaposition of Spanish, English, and Black Vernacular with science fiction functions in the novel because the latter allows room for stretching realities and describing phenomenon that cannot be explained in just one language. Díaz's narrative defines the complex nature of cultural interactions in the colonial system while challenging standard modes of expression. The author's narrative style, as he himself points out, is built from marginalized discourses. This is significant because the Dominican writer uses these narratives that have long been devalued and rejected as a means to subvert a mainstreamed code system. The process of deconstructing and reconfiguring languages is, as I have shown, is not a phenomenon unique to Junot Díaz's prose. The narrative style in *Oscar Wao* is indicative of a practice that not only has its tradition in both Afro Latin American and African American literatures, but that is part of an ongoing process of decolonization and self-affirmation.

To say that Díaz's narrative challenges colonial systems in his novel does not suggest that he believes that Columbus, Trujillo, and the United States are the only ones responsible for the problems that Dominican and Dominican-Americans face. In fact, he himself contends that, while he criticizes these colonial systems, part of the process of overcoming obstacles involves examining the ways in which the colonized subject has a hand in his own marginalization: "Exposing white racism and white arrogance is important, but, if I don't criticize myself and my peoples, how are we ever going to get better?" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 901). Decolonization happens when both the colonizer and the colonized subject recognize their roles in the system, and work together in changing it.

Having established *Oscar Wao* as an alternarrative and a vehicle for critical self-assessment, it is now possible to discuss the possibility of the novel as an example of Afro-Latino discourse. On the one hand, the story of Oscar Wao is formatted as that of a hero. Yunior constantly refers to the protagonists as "our hero" or "our heroine." This type of narration serves two purposes. First, it draws in the reader as an active participant in the text. It is almost as if the reader were watching the story in a live television broadcast. By establishing Oscar as a hero with human sensibilities, Díaz creates a character with whom the audience can identify and inevitably cheer for. Robert Weiner addresses this concept as he explains the reason for the increased popularity of superhero films: ". . . people want to see the struggle between right and wrong, and they want to see the hero or heroine defeat the forces of hate, destruction and evil. They can associate these films with the struggle of humanity as a whole"(9). As active participants in the text, the readers can better empathize with the characters. Secondly, the protagonist's physical appearance makes him the total opposite of what is traditionally defined as an hero: "An epic hero is normally of superior social station, often a king or a leader in his own

right. He is usually tall, handsome and muscular. He must be preeminent, or nearly so, in athletic and fighting skills. The latter ability implies not just physical skill, but also the courage to utilize it” (Toohey 9-10). Oscar, by virtue of his eccentricities, is an Afro-Latino version of Clark Kent, the mild-mannered alter ego of Superman. On the one hand, he is an atypical Dominican male and a nerd belonging to a lower socioeconomic class. Moreover, his family’s history predisposes him to a doomed existence. These characteristics make him an anomaly to such an extent that he must strive to obtain any sense of normalcy (i.e., romantic relationship, ability to fit in with his peers, etc.). Nevertheless, it is this struggle that makes Oscar human, and therefore relatable. His battle for cultural acceptance mirrors that of many Afro-Latinos who, while they acknowledge their Latino heritages, face the additional burden of discrimination due to the color of their skin. Forced to negotiate between two cultural identities, these Afro-Descendants must contend with the isolation resulting from an inability to completely belong to any one group.

Oscar’s position as a social pariah is made more evident at his death. After refusing to stop seeing his love interest Ybón, Oscar is taken to a canefield where he is to be murdered by hired men. Standing bravely before the men, he tells them that they are wrong for killing him, and that his love for Ybón is pure. In pleading for his life, the narrator notes that Oscar’s Spanish is “good for once” (321). The men wait for him to finish, and then reply, “Listen, we’ll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English.” The chapter ends with Oscar blurting out *fire*, “unable to help himself” (322). Just as the mispronunciation of “perejil” distinguished Haitians from Dominicans during the Massacre, Oscar’s position as an immigrant in the United States who speaks English makes him *un*Dominican in the context of his homeland. Moreover, the ghettonerd does not meet the criterion to be considered a Dominican on American soil. Although his Spanish is impeccable, it does nothing to identify him as truly Dominican. The hired men

capitalize on this reality when they ask for an English translation; Oscar cannot help himself because his Americanness has become an irrevocable part of his character. This phenomenon is seen in his declaration of the American Dream in the canefields before the men take his life: “Because anything you can dream. . . you can be”(322).³² *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* pokes fun at this concept. Despite one’s hard work and diligence, the realities of racism and discrimination do not always allow one to be what he or she dreams. While Oscar’s ability to speak English and his college education may aid in his success in one way, his race and ethnicity disenfranchise him in another. Caught in between conflicting expectations, Oscar is neither able to find his place in his homeland nor in New Jersey. This feeling of displacement is one that is shared by many U.S. Afro-Latinos who neither feel at home in their homelands nor in the United States. It comes as no surprise, then, that the question facing the Afro-Latino community is the same one that haunted W.E.B. DuBois so many years ago: “How does it feel to be a problem?”(11). As seen with Díaz’s use of language in *Oscar Wao*, hybridization creates issues for socially constructed concepts of race and identity because it challenges what is considered the “norm.” The unique nature of the Afro-Latino dilemma, therefore, requires a reconfiguration of these rigid standards for racial identity. Díaz’s novel, in light of these standards, gives hope that a solution can be reached. The reversing of the curse, or rather the revisionist process of decolonization, involves the weaving together of many narratives with the intent of uncovering a “truer” story. For this reason, autobiographies have an important place in literature produced by Afro-Descendants. The next chapter will examine how two autobiographies—*Down These Mean Streets* (1968) by Piri Thomas and *Black Cuban, Black American* (2000)—add a different

³² “...the American Dream has been formulated in terms of certain basic values and character traits. Americans generally believe in achievement, success, and materialism. This combination of values, in conjunction with equal opportunity, ambitiousness, and hard work and the means of attaining it, could be considered the American Dream” (DeVitis and Rich 5).

dimension to what many have termed the “Latino experience” and therefore establish a basis for what I call “Afro-Latino literary discourse.”

CHAPTER THREE — IS MY BLACK BROWN ENOUGH FOR YOU? : A CRITICAL STUDY OF RACE AND AFRO-LATINO/A IDENTITY FORMATION IN *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS* (1967) AND *BLACK CUBAN, BLACK AMERICAN* (2000)

“He never spoke a word to me,
And yet He called my name;
He never gave a sign to me,
And yet I knew and came.
At first I said, "I will not bear
His cross upon my back;
He only seeks to place it there
Because my skin is black.”

--“Simon the Cyrenian Speaks” by Countee Cullen (1903-1946)³³

Introduction

In this chapter, I will trace the development of the two authors in the autobiographies *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) and *Black Cuban, Black American* (2000) by Piri Thomas and Evelio Grillo respectively. Both authors’ stories highlight the unique struggles of Afro-Latino men in search of self-acceptance in a society that fails to regard their multiple identities. Three issues are evident in these autobiographies. First, Thomas and Grillo are outsiders within their families / communities. Thomas is the darkest member of his family, and feels that he is treated differently as a result. Grillo, while he does eventually refer to himself as Black American, often feels isolated within his community because he is of Cuban descent. Grillo’s transition from Black Cuban to Black American is one that is facilitated by his constant interactions with strong African American role models and the lack of Afro-Cuban role models. Moreover, both men’s journeys into masculinity involve an overcoming of obstacles related to their physical appearances, but the nature of their transformations is different. Grillo describes his transformation as if it is inevitable. His African American mentors and counselors guide and support him in his academic formation, instilling in him a pride in his blackness. In contrast,

³³ Cullen, Countee. “Simon the Cyrenian Speaks.” *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins. New York: Oxford UP, 1976. 347-48. Print.

Thomas' violent environment and low socioeconomic status do not lend him the same emotional and financial support. Therefore, his formation is more of a solitary spiritual quest.

Finally, though both men must endure burdens due to their blackness, their viewpoints of their "burdens" are different. For Thomas, the burden is a weight that is unfairly placed on his shoulders. His redemption comes when he lets go of his self-hatred and accepts the implications afforded him by his skin color. Grillo's autobiography, while it does highlight some obstacles to self-acceptance, is more of a "rags to riches" story. The author presents his life in such a way to not only depict and affirm the existence of Afro-Cubans in the United States, but also as a means to convince others who have been in his position (as a Black Latino) that they too can succeed in spite of their color. This success, however, is not simply something to be enjoyed on one's own; part of being successful as a minority involves giving back to the community. The transformation witnessed in this text, therefore, is an inevitable shift from that of a person that is egotistical to one who is socially conscious. Grillo's change from self-concern to social consciousness is indicative of a necessary process that many Afro-Latinos/as have experienced. The lack of Black Latino/a role models, the invisibility of this community in general, and long-standing racial tensions in the United States make it necessary for Black Latinos/as to be concerned with social justice and racial equality both in this nation and in their countries of origin.

Despite having different journeys, it is evident that these men suffer from the isolation of being of both African and Latin American descent. Although they manage to find acceptance among friends and sometimes family, the sense of being different—of not belonging—is always prevalent. I define this phenomenon as the impostor complex.³⁴ To overcome the effects of this

³⁴ According to the *The Encyclopedia of Adolescence*, the impostor syndrome is a condition in which individuals "experience a persistent belief that they do not deserve their achievements"(Levesque 1397).

condition, one must undergo a process by which he or she learns to embrace a marginal space without fear of compromising either of the cultures to which he or she ascribes. It is at this stage that the individual begins to view him or herself as part of multiple communities irrespective of how others may categorize him or her. Given the static system of racialization in the United States, an adherence to multiple cultural backgrounds—particularly those of minorities—automatically makes biculturalism a highly politicized position. As part of two or more marginalized communities, Afro-Latinos/as often feel a sense of political allegiance to both the Hispanic and Black communities. This concept of social responsibility occurs as a consequence of Afro-Latinos/as' need to raise awareness of their existence to the rest of the world, the overall lack of positive Black Hispanic role models, and of their desire to help others in their community that may not have the ability to understand or communicate their struggles with their identity. Hence, as we will see with the aforementioned autobiographies, what begins as a “Black burden”—the constant battles against discrimination, low self-worth due to race, and socioeconomic inequality—becomes a sense of social obligation to both Latinos and Afro-

This phenomenon is not a documented psychological disorder; however, the consequences of this condition can be damaging to those who experience it. Psychologists Clance and Imes coined the term in 1978 when investigating high profile women who felt that they were not as capable as others believed. Typically, people with impostor syndrome have an inability to internalize their positive accomplishments despite receiving praise or compliments. They often attribute their success to factors outside their control such as luck, charm or fate instead of to their own ability. This condition usually manifests in two ways. Some individuals feel that they are incapable of fulfilling expectations that others may have of them. Possible results of these feelings of inadequacy include depression, perfectionism, neuroticism or introversion. Others may not perform to the best of their ability to prevent the possibility of failure. With this manifestation of the impostor syndrome, it is not uncommon for individuals to engage in self-destructive behaviors such as self-sabotage or procrastination. While the term *impostor complex* as it is used in the context of this chapter has some connections to the original meaning, it is more specific to the reality of the multicultural individual who is in-between two or more distinct cultures. Oftentimes, these people—despite sharing certain characteristics that may suggest membership in one or more ethnic or racial groups—feel as if they do not belong in either group. This feeling produces an isolation that becomes an obstacle to not only that individual's self-acceptance, but also his or her sense of acceptance from other people in either group.

Descendants. It is this recognition of the importance of unity in confronting issues of social justice that confirms the existence of an exclusive Afro-Latino community.

Performance artist E. Patrick Johnson asserts that *blackness* cannot be attributed to any one particular group, but rather it is *appropriated* with the effect of the individual either becoming a part of a Black community and/or excluding others who do not fit the individual's concept of blackness (2-3). This phenomenon often occurs among Afro-Latinos as a consequence of racial discrimination both in American society and in the Latino community. When appropriating blackness involves excluding others, the identity that manifests as a result is politicized. I argue that despite their differing perceptions of their blacknesses, both Thomas' and Grillo's appropriations of their racial heritages demonstrate a tendency toward exclusion. To overcome the obstacles that discrimination presents, they are obligated to reject White, and at times Latino, institutions and ideologies in the interest of preserving their dignity, protecting their right to define themselves, and of gaining a degree of cultural capital that is not contingent upon societal perceptions of racial and ethnic identity. One of the means in which these men have achieved these goals is through social activism. While interest in social justice is not necessarily explicit in the texts mentioned above, both writers acknowledge in interviews and in subsequent texts that the act of writing their struggles is not only a means of protest, but also a call to unity and action in the face of injustice. This cry for change is unique in that both writers are equally as concerned with issues of racism in the United States as they are with improving conditions in their home islands. I assert that the authors' need to write their life stories not only indicates the existence of an Afro-Latino community that shares in their experiences, but it also positions Afro-Latinity as a possible form of blackness that is not consistent with the American view of Black identity (i.e., African American).

Towards a Theory for Understanding Afro-Latino/a Life Writings

At this time, there is no established theory that specifically deals with U.S. Afro-Latino autobiographical texts. However, there has been some acknowledgment of the existence of a distinct struggle between being Latino/a and being both Black and Latino/a in an American context. David Vázquez, author of the study *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identity*, asserts that “narratives strategies employed by Latina/o authors are intentional and conscious attempts to disrupt racial and ethnic binaries”(13). He continues by saying that “works by authors like Jesús Colón, Julia Álvarez, and Piri Thomas constitute refusals of white supremacy. . .and counter the insufficiencies of hegemonic notions of the subject in order to argue against what critical race theory scholar Leslie Espinoza calls ‘dichotomous categorical identity’”(14). Like Vázquez, most critics and literary analysts recognize that Afro-Latinos/as possess and depict in their writing a different perspective of American society than their Latino/a counterparts because of their struggles against racism and discrimination. Nevertheless, these discussions often position Afro-Latino texts under the umbrella of modern U.S. Latino literature. To be clear, the purpose of this analysis is not to say that Afro-Latino literature has no connection to U.S. Latino literature as a whole, but I do argue that the ways in which these writers challenge standard racial and ethnic categorizations as a means to overcome obstacles perpetuated by their doubly marginalized positioning make their literature distinct from their Latino/a counterparts. In many cases, these obstacles often connect Afro-Latinos/as to the African American community since both groups share a history of disenfranchisement and collaboration. Therefore, explanation of the structure of and the motivation behind Afro-Latino autobiographical texts must incorporate some aspects of theories associated with African American life-writings. I will also look at some theories related to Latino autobiography,

specifically as they relate to the immigrant experience. Finally, I will construct a theory on which I will base my discussion of the previously mentioned autobiographies. This will involve determining specifically how Afro-Latinos/as must mediate between their Latino heritage and their blackness.

To understand how both Thomas and Grillo negotiate between their multiple identities in their narratives, it is necessary to determine the authors' motives for writing their life stories. According to Kenneth Mostern, autobiography—or “life-writing”—is not synonymous with personal experience, but rather it is “an articulation based on the determinate memory and recall of experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics” (10). By this definition, autobiography is just as much an expression of the writer's recollection of the events of his or her life as it is an examination of the mentalities and values to which the person may consciously—or unconsciously—aspire. The process of identity formation—as mentioned in Chapter One—involves components of which the individual may or may not be aware at any given time. This understanding of identity development explains why identities—namely racial identities—are constantly shifting with each passing generation. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi take this perspective a step further by suggesting that autobiographies not only demonstrate the instability of static racial categories, but they also underscore the complex relationship between one's memory of traumatic life events and the collective memory of histories of disenfranchisement and domination (qtd. in Mostern 10). It is in the intersection between individual recollections and collective trauma that the process of one's racial identity is formed. For this reason, autobiographies, memoirs and testimonials are important artifacts in the study of identity politics among different groups of Afro-Descendants. Because these texts are written either in response to an overall lack of

minority role models, or as a tool to expose and thereby overcome oppression and White supremacy, they are just as much an expression of the author (the “I”) as they are an articulation of the collective “I” of the racial or ethnic group(s) to which the author belongs.

It is therefore of little coincidence that many Latino and African American leaders and activists have turned to the life-writing genres as a means to define their political positions. Some of these writers—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Malcolm X, Evelio Grillo, and Angela Davis to name a few—have used their life-writings to further their political agendas, to foster symbiotic relationships between groups that are at odds with one another, and / or to educate the society at large about issues of social justice within their communities. Some early twentieth century Latino writers wrote autobiographies to not only chronicle how Latinos were treated in the U.S., but also to construct what Norma Cantú calls “folklore-inspired narratives that seek to resist the erasure of traditional culture during a radical reshaping of traditional culture” (314). Like some African American autobiographies, Latino immigrant narratives are written as an example for future generations of what one can accomplish through hard work in America (Cantú 315). Irrespective of the motivations behind African American and Latino life-writings, it is evident that these texts provide a voice for the marginalized groups they represent since they appear in response to the virtual absence of Black and Latino role models. President Barack Obama, in the book *The Obama Nation*, recalls the impact that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* had on him during his high school years: “His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me. . .the blunt poetry of his words, his unadorned insistence on respect, promised a new and uncompromising order, martial in its discipline, forged through sheer force of will”(Corsi 90). These texts served to encourage subsequent generations, and helped to incorporate the voices of marginalized people in a national history that had formerly excluded them. Cultural Studies

scholar Paul Gilroy posits that the author's writing of his or her life story "becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation"(69). One may argue, therefore, that, for marginalized peoples, the act of life writing is a form of decolonization. If the writing of national histories has been subject to hegemonic discourses that have dehumanized and excluded minorities, the latter must then write him or herself and his or her nation into existence. In doing so, the individual both humanizes and liberates his or her nation / community. As Fanon asserts in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The "thing" colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation. (2)

Note that in the description, Fanon uses the word *new* multiple times. This emphasis on newness or creation implies that the natural impetus of the colonized or marginalized individual is to define him or herself in the language of the dominant culture. To overcome this tendency, he or she must adopt new terminologies and discourses that better define his or her reality. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many Afro-Descendant writers—particularly those of the Negritude Movement—altered and deconstructed the language that they inherited from their "mother" countries to create what they felt was the purest expression of their identities. Alteration of grammatical and syntactic structures is symbolic of what Fanon describes as an encounter between the colonizer and the colonized (2). Creating a *new* language or writing in a

creole language is a form of catharsis for the writer that allows him or her to challenge what are considered standard notions of self-expression. Like their Afro-Descendant counterparts, Latinos have written autobiographies to “destabilize and contest exclusive subjectivities” (Vázquez, “Novel” 26). Their texts employ new terminologies—often a combination of English and Spanish—to show the nature of the author’s dual identity.

The autobiographical texts of African Americans are political in the sense that the subject, in an effort to explain the events of his or her life, has to contend with the impact of racial trauma on his or her sense of self. In recalling these traumatic events, the subject may subconsciously suppress other politics. For instance, many Black females may articulate their experiences from a racial standpoint as opposed to a feminist perspective since the latter has been traditionally associated with middle-class White women. As Black literary critic bell hooks notes, what is not said in autobiographical texts is just as important as what is explicitly expressed (Mostern 11). The literary silences in such writings are demonstrative of the political mechanisms at play and the latter’s effect on the subject’s self-concept. Sometimes the gaps found in autobiographical texts are not solely due to racial trauma and repression, but rather to the normal consequences of telling one’s story by memory. Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* is primary example of this. The writer has mentioned in several interviews that the first version of the book that he wrote while in prison was accidentally thrown into an incinerator. The version that is now in print, therefore, is a text that Thomas rewrote from memory. Although the author says that writing the autobiography was like reliving the painful events of his life, he does admit to using some poetic license in telling his stories: “I don't know how to write fiction but anything that has happened can be written. What I utilize is poetic license sometimes in setting it up, because I am an artist. You have to set up a sense for a climax and a feeling and a

flow” (Piri Thomas and Carmen Hernández, “They Have Forced Us to Be Universal”). Despite the methods employed in writing an autobiography, the goal of many Afro-Descendant writers has been to gain awareness of his or her inward oppression so that he or she can overcome it.

In addition to understanding the silences and poetic license involved in the Afro-Descendant’s development of the text, the reader must also come to terms with the writer’s constant negotiation between the different aspects of his or her identity. As Mostern notes in his analysis of African American autobiographies, the latter is the sum of the “constant and conscious negotiating of the “I” with a variety of racialized engagements”(45). In the case of Afro-Latino life-writings, this negotiation manifests in the constant pitting of Latinity against and alongside blackness throughout the text. Often, blackness is defined as if it does not relate to Latinity or vice-versa in an effort to put into words the conflicted nature of the author’s identity(ies). While these conflicts are not necessarily resolved by the end of the autobiographies, there is an acceptance and even an embracing of the duality afforded by these identities that manifests either as a concern for Black and Latino cooperation against social injustices (*Black Cuban, Black American*), or a rejection of self-destructive behaviors (*Down These Mean Streets*).

Historical and Cultural Context of the Autobiographies

The publications of both Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* and Evelio Grillo’s *Black Cuban, Black American* coincide with important cultural and social movements in the United States and abroad. Thomas’ autobiography is published in the late 1960s, a period of volatile racial tension and economic inequality. Critic Lisa McGill cites in her analysis of the autobiography that the year 1967 marked a period of rioting in several cities in the United States—Detroit and Newark, New Jersey to name a few—due to racial and social injustices

(165). It is estimated that there were over a hundred revolts in this year alone (McGill 165). Charles Jones and Judson Jeffries claim that the period of riots began in 1966, and marked the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the onset of the Black Power Movement (25). Young minorities, frustrated with the Civil Rights Movement's failure to procure the advancements in social justice that they so desired, began to take more violent measures to gain the attention of the U.S. Government. They rejected the notion of civil disobedience and called for direct action to resolve the issues of poverty, unemployment and racial profiling in their communities. As a result, several political organizations such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Young Lords were established during the Black Power Movement.³⁵ These groups were militant, but sought to protect and provide for their communities in ways that the U.S. Government would not. Moreover, these groups established a system of martial law and provision that protected local communities from drug dealers and corrupt police. Some of the programs the BPP initiated include a free clothing program developed in 1970, free busing to prisons, a neighborhood watch program known as SAFE (Seniors Against Fearful Environment), free pest control, child development centers and "Liberation schools," and the People's Free Medical Research Health Clinic also established in 1970 (Jones and Jeffries 30).

Other agendas that attributed to the BPP's success during the 1970s were the communication of social injustices and organization ideologies to local communities and the willingness to collaborate with other leftist groups. The BPP's newsletter, *The Black Panther*, informed the public about group events and rallies and explained the organization's bylaws and

³⁵ It is necessary to point out that not all of the organizations that appeared during the Black Power Movement were solely concerned with the African American community. In fact, several groups such as the Young Lords (made up of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and New York), the Brown Berets (a Chicano group based in southern California), and the Red Guards (a Chinese revolutionary group in the Oakland Bay area) emerged in response to the economic disparities in their local communities. These organizations, while they sometimes diverged from the BPP in terms of their ideologies, were inspired by the latter's survival programs and infrastructure.

political views. The BPP often collaborated with other leftist groups such as the Young Lords to support equality for all oppressed peoples. Members of the latter organization believed that it was only through solidarity among the poor—particularly Blacks and Latinos—that justice could be secured. Local and federal governments perceived these agendas to be a threat to governmental authority, and therefore portrayed the BPP, the Young Lords, and other groups like them as a danger to American society. Despite measures to disband the BPP and block dissemination of their newsletter, the organization remained strong for sixteen years.³⁶ Although these organizations are often criticized for their militarism, their contributions, as well as their protest of racist government policies have served to improve conditions in local communities and to foster unity among both Blacks and Latinos.

As a social activist and a former prisoner, Thomas was very much aware of the injustices in his community, and was therefore involved in activities that promoted education and racial equality. While writing *Down These Mean Streets*, he participated with other Black activists in a Civil Rights march in the south, and worked with local youth to keep them off the streets (McGill 165). Unlike some of his contemporaries Pedro Pietri and Miguel Piñero, Thomas

³⁶ Although the original BPP disbanded in 1982 with the closing of the organization's Oakland Community School due to leader Huey Newton's use of the BPP's fund to support his drug habit, there was a resurgence of a New Black Panther Party in 1991 in Dallas, Texas. A comparatively small organization, it has supported local communities through the creation of a breakfast program, food and furniture distributions, as well as protests. More recently, the NBPP called for nationwide protest of the Zimmerman Trial verdict. Nevertheless, African American support of the organization is considerably low due to the new group's tendency toward armed retaliation (Jones and Jeffries 6). The Huey P. Newton Foundation also released a statement on their website which asserted that the NBPP is in no way connected to the original BPP and that it does not hold true to the ideologies supported by the original Party members: "[The NBPP] denigrate[s] the [original] Party's name by promoting concepts absolutely counter to the revolutionary principles on which the Party was founded. Their alleged media assault on the Ku Klux Klan serves to incite hatred rather than resolve it. The Party's fundamental principle, as best articulated by the great revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, was: 'A true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.' The Black Panthers were never a group of angry young militants full of fury toward the "white establishment. The Party operated on love for black people, not hatred of white people" (Huey P. Newton Foundation, "There Is No New Black Panther Party: An Open Letter From the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation").

himself was never associated with the Young Lords. He is known for his role in the Civil Rights Movement, and for his impact on the Nuyorican Literary Movement.³⁷ He has often been cited in interviews as saying that *Down These Mean Streets* was written as a testament to the racism, poverty, drug abuse, and gang violence that has poisoned and continues to poison American society. Thomas believed that literature could be used not only to illuminate aspects of the human experience that would otherwise be unknown to many, but also to unify people of different cultures in the interest of positive change. In an interview with Dr. Ilan Stavans, Thomas responds to the critic's insistence that writers who discover the powerlessness of their words often find themselves depressed:

Words are important because they awaken consciousness and thus can inspire action...The world has no right to judge intelligence by the color of one's skin. . .And this is the struggle that we have had to wage, to allow all the colors to express their humanity through literature and the other arts to learn from each other, as a people, for we are not only geographic locations, colors, sexes, or preferences. We are earthlings who share a common bond--our humanity. (Stavans and Thomas 351-352)

Thomas's autobiography serves as both a call to change and to community. In a letter written to the editor of the autobiography, Thomas expresses his frustration at the lack of Afro-Latino/a voices in literary discourse:

³⁷ The Nuyorican Literary Movement of the sixties was a cultural and intellectual movement in which Puerto Rican writers from New York sought to define their own identities apart from the island. According to Nicolás Kanellos, these writers "proclaimed their bilingualism and biculturalism, and mixed and blended the English and Spanish in their speech and writing, creating a new esthetic that was interlingual and transcultural. . ." (8). These authors—Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñedo, Piri Thomas and Nicolasa Mohr to name a few—explored the psyches of characters negotiating between two or more cultures in the hopes of finding a place in an otherwise uncompromising society. Two foundational works from this movement include Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* and Nicolasa Mohr's 1973 autobiography *Nilda* (Kanellos 8).

Today, because of this fantastic Negro social revolution that is exploding throughout the world and throughout the United States, many Negro writers are finding an open market for their inner sensitivity and essence [sic] of personal involvement [sic]. What about the Puerto Rican Negro, whose tongue speaks Spanish and skin shouts Negro? (Thomas cited in McGill 162)

This question is, in essence, the central argument in *Down These Mean Streets*. The author's preoccupation with the lack of Afro-Hispanic American voices in literature becomes one of the motives for his writing of the book. During the same interview with Ilan Stavans, Thomas cites African American John Oliver Killens' autobiography *Youngblood* as one of his inspirations for writing his life story (350). In essence, it is the author's connection to Killen's experience as a Black man during the Depression era that encourages him to write out his own rage at the discrimination he himself experienced as a young man. Aside from functioning as a form of catharsis for the author, *Down These Mean Streets* is a challenge to socially established racial and ethnic categories; theorist Lisa McGill accurately defines the autobiography as the author's search for "community amid the binary racialization of the United States"(164).

Evelio Grillo's *Black Cuban, Black American* functions as both an autobiography and a historical account of the political and social atmosphere of both early twentieth century Cuba and the Cuban community of Ybor City in Tampa, Florida. Despite being published in the year 2000, the autobiography spans about a half-century (from the early 1900s until about 1950). At the beginning of the book, Grillo paints a picture of the social dynamic between races in Cuba before the rise of Fidel Castro to power. Although he notes that there was no legal separation between Blacks and Whites in Cuba, he asserts that "discrimination along racial lines and separation along social and economic lines did exist" (7). Therefore, affluent Black Cubans were an

anomaly. The few that did exist, however, resided alongside upperclass Whites. According to Grillo, these Afro-Descendants were referred to as *negros blancos*, or “White Blacks”(7). Despite the limitations imposed upon Afro-Cubans, they did enjoy many of the same freedoms as Whites. Grillo remarks that Blacks had unrestricted access to hospitals, schools, and clinics, and often held administrative offices in these areas (7). Relationships between Afro-Cubans and White Cubans changed drastically upon entering Ybor City. Due to *de facto* segregation, Black Cubans were restricted to the largely African American neighborhoods east of Nebraska Avenue, which formed the western boundary of Ybor City. White Cubans raised the suspicion of American Whites and European immigrants with regard to their European heritage. This was mainly due to high incidence of racial mixture in Cuba, and the people’s unrestricted migration from the island to the United States (Dworkin y Méndez ix). Still, White Cubans had more opportunities for better living conditions than their darker compatriots.

The immigration of Cubans to the United States during the early twentieth century was the result of several factors. First, high tariffs and unsatisfactory conditions for tobacco workers in Cuba led to the movement of the cigar industry into Key West. The industry eventually expanded into Tampa, Florida where Cuban businessman Vicente Martínez Ybor opened one of the first cigar factories in the area. Black and White Cubans came to Florida along with their families in the hopes of bettering their living situations. Evelio Grillo’s family was one of many that came to live in Ybor City. The cigar industry enjoyed great success in Florida for about fifty years. The growing political unrest in Cuba, along with American interest in cheaper cigars and cigarettes, however, led to the industry’s eventual decline in 1930 (Ribó 308).

Aside from cigar factory workers, Florida also captured the attention of Cuban politicians seeking amnesty from the political turmoil of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Cuba's ambiguous status as an independent republic occupied by American military forces allowed for unrestricted movement between the two nations. Nevertheless, there would not be another major Cuban migration until the onset of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 (Duane 42).

Aside from its historical significance, Grillo's autobiography also discusses a community that until recently has remained in virtual anonymity. Susan Greenbaum, author of *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa*, remarks that "the popular construction of Cuban-American identity stands in deliberate opposition to blackness [since]. . .[m]edia stereotypes have presented Cuban immigrants as a case study in successful striving" (1). This success is in stark contrast to the poverty of the African American community, whose economic situation has only worsened in Miami (Mohl and Rose qtd. in Greenbaum 1-2). Grillo himself acknowledges the invisibility of Afro-Cubans in his autobiography, but only as it pertains to the existence of Afro-Cuban heroes: "Nor were there any encyclopedias, autobiographies, reference books, or magazines to arouse a child's imagination. No photographs, prints, or posters of heroic black Cubans graced our walls to teach us about our heritage" (41). The lack of Afro-Cuban role models has an indelible effect on Grillo, and seals his fate as a Black American. It is in the schools with predominantly African American populations where he finds his sense of identity and history. He continues,

I learned this [the lack of Black Cuban heroes] when I entered public high school in the tenth grade. There I was introduced to black history on a daily basis as we memorialized black heroes, or celebrated famous artists and scholars. Though not explicitly part of the curriculum, the history of slavery as dehumanizing seeped through the celebrations, the spirituals, the dramatic readings, and the way that the teachers treated us, they way they respected us precisely *because* we were black. (41)

This experience echoes that of many U.S. Afro-Latinos/as who by virtue of their mixed heritages, have few if any role models with whom they can identify. This does not mean, however, that there were no organizations that sought to inform Afro-Latinos/as about their heritage. One of these groups—La Sociedad Martí-Maceo—was formed precisely because Afro-Cubans were often not welcomed in other clubs and organizations due to their skin color (Kanellos, “A Socio-Historic Study of Hispanic Newspapers in the United States,” 254). Still, racism and the lack of visibility in historical records have until recently served to reduce such groups into a status of near-anonymity. This issue, in essence, underscores another major purpose of Grillo’s autobiography: to inform the public about the existence of a true Afro-Cuban heritage. Antonio López examines this particular purpose in his discussion of Grillo’s process to publish his memoirs:

Indeed, it was Grillo himself, through his agent, who submitted the manuscript to Arte Público for consideration—an act, as it were, of *self-recovery* (emphasis mine). I offer that such a recovery of *Black Cuban*, *Black American* compensates, in a sense, for the “irrecoverability” of its earlier-period Afro-Cuban American context (the 1920s through the 1940s of an Afro-Latino modernism). . . In *Black Cuban*, *Black American*, a “living author” articulates these dead ones; he offers his text in a way that recalls, even as it takes, their places. (215)

Grillo’s work not only accounts for the presence of an Afro-Cuban community in the past, but it also calls for a reconsideration of static racial and ethnic categories in the present. The idea of “recovery” that López points out earlier in his analysis is linked to the series in which this autobiography is included; it is part of the “Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage” series (214). According to the editor’s description of the book, the collection “has traditionally

been devoted to long-lost literary and historical works by Hispanics of many decades—even centuries—past.” (Dworkin y Méndez, back cover). Ironically, Grillo is the only living author in the series. López postulates that Grillo’s text is not technically “lost;” the activist himself sends in the manuscript to be published (214). Nevertheless, it is the autobiography’s transcendence as a U.S. Afro-Latino text that makes López define it as a “recovery.” I argue that the autobiography functions as more of an “unveiling” or a “discovery” of a Black Latino heritage. Moreover, the racial duality expressed in the book’s title is echoed in its function as both a historical record and a declaration / celebration of one’s identity. On the one hand, the autobiography gives a historical background of the customs and position of Afro-Cubans in Tampa society. On the other hand, it chronicles the life of a multicultural individual who has a view of himself and his society that transcends socially established racial categories. According to López, this duality, along with the publication date, situates this book in the category of contemporary U.S. Latino literature (214).

An important event that occurred at the time of *Black Cuban, Black American’s* publication was the revision of the 2000 U.S. Census. Previously, participants could only choose from five racial categories: White, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other Race. In the 2000 Census, the number of racial categories were increased to fifteen and, for the first time, citizens were given the option of selecting more than one race. The Hispanic category was divided into four subcategories: Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino (Fernández qtd. in Berry and Henderson 5). In addition, the Black category was expanded to Black/African American/Negro to include Sub-Saharan Africans such as Kenyans and Nigerians, as well as Afro-Caribbeans (U.S. Census Bureau, “The Black Population: 2010”). The option of defining one’s self as more

than one race and the change in the definitions of racial groups underscore the fluidity of racial categories and the language used to describe and define them (Berry and Henderson 5).

It is in light of these recent shifts in racial denominations that Grillo celebrates his blackness alongside the other aspects of his identity. In a 2007 conversation with Antonio López, the Cuban judge comments on his pleasure of including Black twice in the autobiography's title. López posits that the double use of the term demonstrates that "the multiple 'blacks' of the title, neither interchangeable nor unrelated, hint at the social collaboration between Afro-Latinas/os and African Americans characterizing Grillo's life, a collaboration that finds expression in the artistic pleasure Grillo admits taking in the seemingly repetitive—but, in fact, different—act of writing the word(s) 'twice'"(215). The interrelatedness of blackness with Cubanness and Americanness paints a picture that not only problematizes established notions of what an American or a Cuban should be, but it also opens up the possibility for cooperation between the African American and Cuban American communities. Although the two "blacks" are different, they are not mutually exclusive. Grillo's status as both "colored" and Afro-Cuban in America gave him a unique perspective on the issue of racism, as well as a larger sphere of influence in combating it. Like his counterpart Arturo Schomburg, Grillo found that integrating himself in and working with the African American community allowed him access to American society and offered solace from racist disapproval from other Latino groups (Flores and Jiménez 13). Nevertheless, the rejection Grillo experienced from other Latinos did not prevent him from getting involved with organizations and causes that would strengthen not only the African American community, but also the Latino community as a whole:

IN EARLY 1949, after three years of graduate study in Latin American History at

Columbia University, I decided to move to California. It was one of the best decisions of

my life. . . I had formed a vague notion of putting my uncommon background to good use by serving as a link between and Spanish-speaking people, and in Oakland I found myself in the middle of a mix of Mexican-Americans and black Americans living in one of the poorest neighborhoods of a thriving city. . . Both groups were generally helped in low esteem by the whites of Oakland, and in this neighborhood they shared all the public institutions for education, recreations, social welfare, and health, as well as probation and parole facilities. (Grillo 130)

Aside from being a judge in the Supreme Court of Alameda County in California, Grillo was a member of various organizations including the Community Service Organization of California, the Spanish-Speaking Unity Council, and the Negro Political Action Association of California among others. His time in the 823rd Engineer Aviation Battalion (Colored) during World War II, as well as his tenure as director of the Alexander Community Center—a Center in Oakland for Blacks and Mexicans—would inspire him to become an activist later in life (Graham). His work with such organizations as the Mexican-American Political Association and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has served to unite the interests of both Black Americans and Latinos to foster better educational opportunities and to improve living conditions for the economically disadvantaged.

Isolation: An Experience That Pre-dates Adulthood

Although Piri Thomas and Evelio Grillo have distinct formations, both authors acknowledge feeling a sense of isolation as young children. At the beginning of the autobiography, Grillo discusses Jim Crow law and its effect on the relationships between Black and White Cubans. Most fairer-skinned Cubans, along with other Latino groups, lived in small

ethnic enclaves separate from White Americans. Though Black Cubans were generally accepted in the Latino neighborhoods, Jim Crow Law still limited the interactions between them and White Cubans. Grillo remarks that:

Black Cubans worked in the factories alongside White Cubans. While my mother formed interracial relationships at work, few, if any, such friendships extended to visits in the homes. Nor did whites and blacks attend church together. Black Cubans had their own mutual benefit society and social center, La Union Martí-Maceo. . .Black Cubans and white Cubans interacted in the streets and in public places such as grocery stores, produce stands, meat markets, and in the corner saloon, where men who were not at work gathered in the afternoon to watch the throwing of the *bolita* bag, and the selection of the day's number, which paid lucky ticket holders five dollars for every penny waged. (7-8)

Despite the cultural connections between White Cubans and Afro-Cubans, the groups were largely segregated. Black Cubans and African Americans generally lived in close proximity to one another, but the relationship between the two groups was not without some tension:

Interactions between our two groups increased only slowly, though steadily, until today the two are comfortably integrated as part of a larger black group...In earlier days, however, a definite guardedness characterized the relationship between those who were not yet good friends. Our parents, who had limited contact with black Americans, sometimes spoke disparagingly of them, criticizing their behavior and attributing the violence that occurred within the lowest economic class to the entire black community. (14)

Later, in the same chapter, Grillo remarks that in spite of the reservations that some Black Cubans had with regard to associating with African Americans, the younger generation of Afro-

Cubans were quite accepting of Black American children: “As children, we had intensive interaction with black Americans in school. We became good friends. We studied with them, we played with them, we fell in love with them and as we grew older, we married them. Our feelings toward them were very positive and we were sensitive to remarks critical of them” (14). The phenotypes of Black Cubans eventually permitted them to identify with the struggles of the African Americans. This identification helped and, in some ways, forced Afro-Cubans to integrate themselves in the Black community. Still, there were some differences that divided the two groups. Not only were they miles apart culturally, but language barriers also limited their interactions: “Generally, however, we did not attend plays, concerts, recitals, and lectures, presented in English. These were held in the large Protestant churches in the black American ghetto, where we seldom venture, other than to attend school”(15). Although Black Cubans did not attend the same churches as their White compatriots, they did not join the Black Protestant churches. Their limited English also prevented them from participating in certain activities that would allow them access to Black culture. Still, Grillo remarks that he himself feels an emotional connection to the African American history and culture that he gleans during his early days at school. He writes:

Black Cubans still built dependent relationships with black Americans, especially our black American teachers, with whom we formed deep, affectionate bonds. But we lived clearly on the margins of black American society, while we worked out our daily existence in the black Cuban ghetto in Ybor City. Yet our identity as black Americans developed strongly. I remember but one black Cuban hero, Antonio Maceo, the general who has led the fight for Cuba’s independence from Spain. There were no photographs in my home of historically significant Cuban blacks. . .My heart and soul belonged to Nat

Turner, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Paul Laurence Dunbar, John Brown, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, Allison Davis, Alain Locke, and the two brothers, James Weldon and James Rosemond Johnson, who wrote the song very dear to my heart, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”(17)

In the first part of the passage, Grillo comments on how the Black Cubans of his time depended greatly on the African American community, particularly for their education. While language and culture were significant barriers to contact between Black Cubans and Black Americans, the political and social limitations imposed upon both groups due to Jim Crow Law unites them in a similar struggle. What is striking about the passage above is the language that Grillo uses; Black Cubans, in spite of their identification with the African American population, still found themselves *on the margins* or in-between. This marginal space was not only racial, but it was also geographical. Black Cubans did attend the same schools as Blacks, but they remained on the outskirts of the African American neighborhoods partly as a result of language and cultural barriers.

Also implicit in the passage is the emphasis on history. Grillo’s interest in African American historical figures is in response to an absence of Afro-Cuban heroes. The need to belong to an identifiable group with historical reach, the isolation of living between cultures, and the shared indignities between American Blacks and Afro-Cubans often provoked the latter to appropriate aspects of African American culture. The stories of how such Black figures as Frederick Douglass overcame adversity instilled a sense of hope in Afro-Cubans who, like their White compatriots, sought to achieve the coveted American Dream. Black heroes were examples of what could be possible with hard work and tenacity. Moreover, they gave a face and a name to

a community that has until recently lived in perpetual anonymity due to its marginalized existence.

Another factor that helps to cement Grillo's transition from Black Cuban immigrant to Black American is his relationship with his parents. In the first chapter of the autobiography, the author describes an episode in which his father and mother discuss whether or not he will go with his father to Cuba. The reader later discovers that the father has contracted tuberculosis, and is leaving for the island to recover. He insists upon taking the young Grillo with him. Though the activist recalls being in his father's presence as a toddler and can relay the details of his father's death, he cannot remember the relationship that they shared: "Only the vaguest impressions of my father exist in my mind. My mother kept absolutely silent about him. She must have been angry with him, for I do not remember her mentioning his name to us children, not even once" (3). Grillo does not go into much detail about the feeling of loss he incurred as a result of his father's death; however, his admiration of the African American mentors in his life does resemble the feeling of affection he once had for his father. One man in particular – Mr. Martin—impacts Grillo's life greatly by encouraging him to get an education. Upon completing the tenth grade in Booker T. Washington High School, young Grillo begins losing interest in school and skipping his classes. His teachers contact Mr. Martin, a Black American businessman who controls a successful insurance company in Tampa and who has earned Grillo's trust. Mr. Martin takes an interest in the success of young Black men in the community, and encourages them to go to college. The businessman not only takes Grillo on as his protégé, but he also opens the doors for the young man to attend school in the North where he can secure a better education. Grillo's relationship with Martin, as he recalls in the autobiography, both provides him with the push he needs to succeed and serves to fill the void that his father's death has caused in him.

Grillo comments on Mr. Martin's care and concern for him in the ninth chapter when he decides to go with his mentor to Washington, D.C., where he is to be enrolled in a new high school. While travelling, the group encounters a patch of rain soaked mud, which results in a car accident. In his description of the events, Grillo recalls the fatherly behavior that Mr. Martin demonstrates towards him:

Mr. Martin's affection and concern showed demonstrably in his face and in his eyes as he checked to see that I was, indeed, unharmed. This interlude with Mr. Martin I savored as a fathering moment, though I could not have expressed it that way at the time. I basked in the radiance of his love, his care and his concern. I had not been that close to a man since my father's death, eleven years previously. . . My father had died when I was three. I do not remember his face. But I remember his presence and his love. . . Mr. Martin's tenderness stirred in me a surge of great affection for him similar to the feelings I remember having for my father. (55)

Mr. Martin is only one of the mentors to whom Grillo refers in the autobiography. In his earlier days, the author mentions Mrs. Byna, a neighbor that cares for him while his mother works. Grillo describes his mother as "lovable but unloved" (24), "serious, very hard-working, very dedicated to our [he and his sibling's] upbringing, and very scrupulous" (23). Although she is highly respected in the community in which they lived, she is known for being severe and overly strict. Grillo's love for his mother is implicit in his remarks as he acknowledges that her severity was well intentioned, but he credits Mrs. Byna for developing in him "a sense of being loved by adults" (20). He writes, "I felt safe and secure with Mrs. Byna. I could feel her great affection for me. . . Not once did she strike me, even lightly. . . I would have enjoyed having my mother treat me with the tenderness that Mrs. Byna demonstrated. Somehow I knew my mother loved me; she

just couldn't express herself physically" (19). What is striking about this passage and the one proceeding it is Grillo's sense of acceptance among the individuals described. The love and care he receives from the Black American role models he admires not only fill the emotional void resulting from the severity of his mother and the loss of his father, but they also help to foster a sense of belonging in American society. As previously mentioned, Afro-Cubans typically did not cross over into the African American ghettos due to the negative stereotypes of Blacks in Tampa. Nevertheless, Grillo writes that he would often walk the six blocks to Mrs. Byna's house in the ghetto for a visit (20). The need for love and acceptance motivates the young man to cross cultural boundaries and to therefore go from being an outsider to belonging.

Moreover, like many young Afro-Cubans of his time, Grillo realizes that successful integration into the Black community presents more options for him. Black Cubans during the 1920s and 1930s were not only affected by the Great Depression, but also by the downward turn of the cigar industry. The instability of work in the cigar factories and the hardships of being Black in segregated Florida left few options for second and third-generation Black Cubans still in search of the better life that their parents could not attain. Their unique positioning as phenotypically Black and culturally Cuban also made upward mobility difficult if not virtually impossible. Conversely, Blacks in the United States had, over time, established educational institutions and businesses independent of White involvement. Therefore, for Black Cubans, cooperation with African Americans was crucial to their success and to their sense of community.

The African Americans that nurtured Grillo guide his formation into a successful Black American man with a strong sense of identity, purpose, and history. The autobiography is explicit in its emphasis on Grillo's inevitable rise to success and the African Americans who play

a role in his transformation from outsider (immigrant) to contributing member (Black American) in American society for two main reasons. First, the autobiography challenges long-standing negative stereotypes of African Americans held by Cubans and other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Secondly, it demonstrates the possibility and necessity of cooperation between Black Americans and Latinos for mutual success and survival. This phenomenon is evident in the autobiography's title; by stating that he is both "Black Cuban" and "Black American," Grillo is establishing himself as a bridge between the two groups.

The young Cuban's transformation from Black Cuban to Black American is not without some tension, however. In Chapter seven, Grillo discusses his experiences attending St. Peter Claver's, a Catholic school whose goal is to provide a good education for African American children and, by extension, Afro-Cuban youth. The school is located on Nebraska Avenue, an area that Grillo describes as "the psychological boundary between the black American and black Cuban ghettos" (39). Although the nuns and priests at the school see him as African American, the Black children at the school sometimes make fun of him because of his Cuban heritage and his use of Spanish:

When they wanted to tease us, our black American schoolmates called us *tally wops*. That phrase, a combination of two slang terms applied to Italians, rang out in the schoolyard whenever black Cuban children were being addressed derisively. Our schoolmates found it difficult to distinguish between the Spanish and Italian languages, so since we sounded Italian to their ears, they attached the misnomers to us... They never physically abused us, but they did substantial hurt to our feelings. (39)

Similar skin colors did not mask the differences between Black Cubans and African Americans. The use of Spanish separated Afro-Cubans from Black Americans, and therefore, isolated them.

In addition, the differences between the Black American and Cuban cultures often make Grillo stand out among his Black schoolmates. For instance, when discussing Thanksgiving with his friends at school, he writes: “A subdued mood descended upon Cuban children at Thanksgiving. We did not dislike it exactly; but we did not welcome it either, for it intensified our feelings of being different and odd. We had only an ordinary meal, while our friends had great celebrations of food, family, church, and community”(31). In a subsequent chapter, Grillo describes the isolation he feels at times when talking to his African American friends:

I remember, for example, one long discussion about Boy Scouts held by a small group of schoolmates, all friends of mine. I remained silent throughout the entire conversation.

What was a Boy Scout? At that moment I felt isolated, as I have frequently, whenever I have confronted some aspect of black American life that was commonplace for my black American friends, but that seemed new and different and, even, strange for me. Similarly, I would sometimes give expression to something peculiarly Cuban with which my black American friends were unfamiliar. The quizzical looks, and sometimes, laughter, which followed left me feeling embarrassed, awkward, and very alone. (44)

Earlier in the chapter, Grillo discusses the differences between Booker T. Washington High School and St. Peter Claver’s School. He asserts that at St. Peter Claver’s there is less of an emphasis on Black American culture, and more on the Catholic faith. Instead, students “are handed a European culture, complete with icons, heroes and heroines” (44). Having had some temporal distance from the situation and become more familiar in his adult life with the struggles of African Americans, Grillo expresses his disappointment at the school’s curriculum. His desire is to understand the culture of his schoolmates, but his educational experience and his inability to comprehend aspects of African American culture separate him from the very group with whom

he feels he should identify the most. Despite sharing a skin color, similar struggles, and, in some respects, a similar history, Grillo is constantly reminded that he is different from his African American friends. Moreover, the Cuban author is separated from the more dominant White Cuban community with whom he shares a culture. A common thread in literature produced by and for Black Latinos/as, the impostor complex indelibly marks the Afro-Latino/a experience and identitic formation. The sense of never belonging anywhere places Afro-Latinos/as in a doubly marginalized position. Overcoming the impostor complex in an American context, then, involves an acceptance of a liminal space and an appropriation of blackness that incorporates elements of both Latino and African American culture.

Like Evelio Grillo, Piri Thomas does not have a strong relationship with his father. His father, James, works long hours, and often transfers his anger and frustration at the family's economic situation onto the rest of the household. The father's bitter demeanor not only puts strain on the relationship between he and Piri's mother, but it also alienates him from his own son. Toward the beginning of the autobiography, the author recalls a typical scene in the Thomas household: the gathering of the children at the door upon the father's arrival. While his siblings rush to meet their father, Thomas stands in the living room and wonders why he does not share the other children's excitement:

Pops. . .how come me and you is always on the outs? Is it something we don't know nothing about? I wonder if it's something I done, or something I am. . .Why do I feel so left outta things with you—like Moms is both of you to me. . .How come when we all play with you, I can't really enjoy it like the rest? How come when we all get hit for doing something wrong, I feel it the hardest? Maybe 'cause I'm the biggest, huh? Or maybe it's 'cause I'm the darkest in this family. (22)

The isolation that the narrator expresses above is not uncommon among Afro-Latinos/as who face the bitter realities of racism in their communities. While this discrimination is often silenced as a means to create the semblance of unity among Puerto Ricans, it contaminates the Puerto Rican community at its basic level: the family (Luis, "Afro-Latino/a Literature," 38). Thomas's relationship with his father becomes more and more troubled as he grows older. This is mainly due to the lack of attention and guidance that the young man receives from his father. While Grillo is able to find mentors and role models to guide him through his adolescent years, Thomas is not afforded the same luxury. Hence, the strong sense of identity that Grillo achieves as a result of the patriarchal relationship he forms with Mr. Martin is impossible for Thomas. Further exacerbating the author's woes is the fact that his father refuses to acknowledge that he himself is Black. One of the ways in which Thomas claims that James denies his blackness is in his choice to marry his mother: "Poppa thinks that marrying a white woman made him white. He's wrong. It's just another nigger marrying a white woman and making her black as him. That's the way the paddy looks at it. The Negro just stays black" (145). Unlike other Latin American nations, Puerto Rico never experienced a larger-scale movement that protested racism or celebrated blackness (Rivero 17). Hence, the dominant discourse on the island was that of *blanqueamiento*, or the whitening of one's skin. The effects of this belief is made manifest in the use of the expression *mejorar la raza* (translation: *to better the race*) to describe when a Black or mulatto person marries a White individual to whiten him or herself (De la Torre, *Hispanic-American Religious Cultures*, 480). Thomas's criticism of his father's choice to marry his mother, then, is not completely off base. James neither confirms nor denies Thomas's accusation, but his response to his son's anger makes the proposed motive a possibility:

I'm not a stupid man. I saw the look of white people on me when I was a young man, when I walked into a place where a dark skin wasn't supposed to be. I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent. I can remember the time when I made my accent heavier, to make me more of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was. I wanted a value on me, son. (153)

The exaggerated accent that James “performs” around others earns him the acceptance that he desires. In essence, he negates the possibility of his blackness by exaggerating his Puerto Ricanness. For James, blackness carries little to no cultural value. If being Puerto Rican inspires pride in these men, then being Black is shameful. The same burden that James describes above is that which Thomas himself carries as a young man. However, as we shall see later, Thomas’s response to and negotiation of his perceived blackness later diverges from that of his father.

Rejected by his family—by his father in particular—and devoid of any strong role models, Thomas finds solace in the streets. According to Lisa McGill, the streets represent a space in which masculinity and fearlessness establish for young people a sense of belonging that they cannot attain in mainstream American society (168). As a young man, Thomas uses his bravado in an effort to prove himself and, ultimately, to survive. The ability to fight becomes especially important as Thomas moves with his family from 111th Street to an Italian neighborhood. Upon meeting Thomas for the first time, a gang of Italian youth refer to him as a “dirty fuckin’ spic” (24). They then ask him what his nationality is. Before Thomas can answer, one of the gang members declares that he is “black enuff to be a nigger”(24). Despite asserting his Puerto Ricanness, the Italian gang members continue to refer to him as Black. It is only after Thomas fights the gang members that they accept him. Nevertheless, this acceptance is not on the basis of his Puerto Ricanness, but rather in spite of his blackness: “He got much heart for a

nigger” (32). Although he has earned respect on the streets, Thomas has difficulty getting others outside his family (particularly Whites and Blacks) to recognize him as Puerto Rican.

Once Thomas leaves the streets and encounters spaces dominated by Whites (i.e., school, the job market, etc.), he is reminded of his blackness. When Thomas’s father lands a better job in Long Island, he moves the family to Babylon, a neighborhood on the south shore of the island. Rejected by some of the White children at school, Thomas decides to leave home and return to Harlem. Now on his own, he goes out in search of work. Thomas stumbles upon an ad for a salesman position and goes to the office for an interview. When he introduces himself as Puerto Rican, Mr. Christian, the interviewer, has difficulty believing that he is who he says he is. During the interview, Thomas asserts his Puerto Ricanness by using Spanish, claiming that he is Catholic, and giving Mr. Christian his mother’s Spanish maiden name. Nevertheless, he is not given the salesman position because he is Black; this becomes evident when Thomas discovers that the White man interviewed after him is immediately hired. Not unlike Grillo, Thomas seeks understanding of this discrimination from his African American friends. In a conversation with his friend Brew, Thomas makes the following observation: “I hate the paddy who’s trying to keep the black man down. But I’m beginning to hate the black man, too, ‘cause I can feel his pain and I don’t know that it oughta be mine...I’m trying to be a Negro, a colored man, a black man, ‘cause that’s what I am. But I gotta accept it myself, from inside” (124). The frustration that he expresses here is multifaceted. On the one hand, Thomas identifies with the Black man in his suffering, which causes him to hate Whites. Nevertheless, it is this same identification that causes him to dislike Blacks and therefore himself. Like his father, Thomas does not ascribe the same cultural value to blackness as he does to his Puerto Ricanness (McGill 169). He accepts his blackness not on the basis of its cultural value, but rather because others have imposed this

identity upon him. While Grillo benefits to some extent from his identification with Black Americans, Thomas's blackness is constantly a stumbling block. In response to this situation, the young Afro-Puerto Rican, like his father, attempts to prove his Latinity to others. In the end, Thomas comes to realize that his assertions are futile. This does not mean that Thomas altogether rejects his Latinity; rather, he eventually learns to accept both aspects of his identity. Nevertheless, like Grillo, Thomas learns to live as a Black man in order to survive in areas dominated by White Americans.

Also pertinent to this discussion is the fact that Thomas is not only perceived as Black by the Whites that he encounters, but also by his African American friends. The fact that he disassociates himself from African Americans is problematic to Brew. In the chapter entitled "Hung Up Between Two Sticks," Brew openly addresses this concern with Thomas and tries to make him come to terms with the implications of his skin color: "Yuh think that bein' a Porto Rican lets you off the hook? Tha's the trouble. Too damn many you black Porto Ricans got your eyes closed. . . Jus''cause you can rattle off some different kinda language don' change your skin one bit" (124). Brew's perception of the narrator's blackness is problematic considering that Thomas's family see him as simply Puerto Rican. The fact that Thomas is treated differently from his siblings because of his darker skin reflects the ideology of the Puerto Rican community. These conflicting viewpoints create in him an impostor complex—although he is phenotypically Black, he is emotionally and culturally Puerto Rican. Under these circumstances, the narrator cannot comfortably fit in either group. In response to this unique positioning, Thomas not only runs to the streets, but also to the South where he seeks to discover the source of the discrimination that he faces. It is in these journeys that Thomas reaches the conclusion that blackness is an obstacle that he must ultimately accept and then overcome (McGill 168). This

perception is contrary to that of Grillo who celebrates his blackness as an affront to socially established racial discourses prevalent in both the White and White Cuban communities. What does unite these men, however, is the fact that their appropriations of blackness help them not only to cope with the injustices resulting from racism, but also to challenge White supremacy in American society, and by extension, the Latino community.

Adulthood: Two Different Experiences, One Trauma

The experiences of both Grillo and Thomas reveal the dilemma of Afro-Latinos/as in a context that is racially bipolar (White/Black). This situation produces a form of isolation that I have defined up to this point as an *impostor complex*. The displacement that Afro-Latinos/as often feel solicits two responses: First, there is a concern for both international policies and social justice; and second, there is an intent to reject or retaliate against White supremacy. The second response requires Afro-Latinos/as to undergo a process by which they must first come to terms with their blackness before earning the right to occupy a liminal space (having multiple identities). Ironically, the aforementioned process involves at least partial acceptance of a conceptualization of race founded upon the notion of White supremacy. Furthermore, as E. Patrick Johnson notes in his study *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, when White Americans define blackness, “they often do so in ways that maintain ‘whiteness’ as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and entitlement, as a ubiquitous, fixed, unifying signifier that seems invisible”(4). This understanding of blackness is also inherent in the underlying racist ideologies found in such concepts as *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* in Latin American culture.

In their fight against discrimination, Afro-Latinos/as have often had to learn and challenge certain “codes of conduct” designated for African Americans (i.e., not making eye contact with White authority figures, living separate from Whites, etc.). In a society like that of the United States where race is based on a Black-White dichotomy, any rejection of White supremacy as established by these rules of conduct is considered a performance of blackness. Therefore, Afro-Latinos/as must construct a form of blackness that is as much informed by their Latino heritages as by their connections to the African American community. This new Black identity is not the same as that which is defined by Whites. Rather, it is a phenomenon firmly grounded in the dialectics of authenticity. Johnson further asserts that when Black Americans refer to Black authenticity, the term is used with the intent to exclude more people than it includes (3). For minorities, ethnic and racial identities, according to Catherine Ramirez, “have been and still are associated with authenticity and fidelity—in other words, with ‘keeping it real’” (8). As with any type of identity formation, the development of Afro-Latino blackness invokes a process that, at times, borders on confusion, self-hatred or frustration at the burden of racism. In the cases of Evelio Grillo and Piri Thomas, the authors’ acceptance of their blackness and negation of White supremacy has the dual purpose of reclaiming their humanity while writing the Afro-Latino community into existence.

I must make the point here that it is not my intention to define blackness as an essence. This is virtually impossible as the definition of blackness varies according to the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they are constructed. What I do intend, however, is to suggest that both Grillo and Thomas appropriate cultural nuances associated with blackness in such a way that they are able to both reject the mechanisms of White domination and define themselves in their own terms. This does not mean that Thomas and Grillo do not face obstacles in their

quests for self, and ultimately, communal acceptance. Neither does it mean that they are free from the pressures of racism and discrimination. On the contrary, it is through struggle that they are able to move toward a dismantling of restrictive conceptualizations of race.

Having limited opportunities as a Black Cuban, Grillo recognizes that he must integrate himself into the African American community to have any possibility of upward social and economic mobility. Although he is educated in the areas of Black history and culture, he still struggles throughout his college years with the fear of not being Black enough. In the chapter “Xavier University,” Grillo writes about an encouraging letter he receives from the African American philosopher Alain Locke. He is so proud of the correspondence that he shows it to Mother Pierre, one of the nuns at the university, who chastens him for being self-centered. He writes, “Humility did not distinguish my demeanor, which in the perspective of the years, makes sense, since I must have been one of the most insecure students on the campus”(87). We discover later in the chapter the reason for this insecurity: “I had made it clear that I was not subject to ‘de-Negrofication,’ a term that many will understand who have served on the margins of powerful white institutions. I reserved the right to ‘think black,’ and to ‘feel black,’ on social issues, whatever the circumstances”(88). In asserting his Black identity, we see Grillo’s desire for authenticity. His unity with the Black community on social issues stems just as much from his identification with Black Americans as it does his insecurity about being perceived as an “impostor.”

In his senior year of college, Grillo joins the Southern Negro Youth Congress, an organization on campus that was believed to be a Communist group. His membership in the group and his participation in the group’s convention raises the administration’s suspicions of his character. He, however, admits to being suspicious of the organization because he felt that “there

was something amiss about a situation in which whites and blacks were working together closely and cooperatively, not too (*sic*) mention that they were socializing, yet”(89)! It is of note that the initial basis for Grillo’s suspicion of the group is not its Communist leaning, but rather the cooperation between Blacks and Whites. The author’s allegiance to his Black heritage makes him leery of Whites and their intentions. Grillo’s experience as a Black Cuban in Tampa, as well as his close connections to his African American role models have indoctrinated him in Black culture and given him membership into the Black American community. His attitude toward Black and White cooperation, therefore, not only signifies an adherence to internalized behaviors associated with the Blacks of his period (i.e., distrust of Whites), but it also demonstrates an appropriation of blackness that fuels his desire to exclude the White members. His apprehension grows when he discovers one of the Black group leader’s stance on the Seamen’s International Union’s declaration of a no-strike pledge. Many Blacks opposed the pledge because they felt it undermined their struggle for equal treatment on ships and in companies that depended on the shipping for their profit. When the leader offers his support of the pledge, Grillo not only concerns himself about being perceived as a Communist, but also as a traitor to the Black race:

It felt strange, being suspected of Communist leanings on the Xavier campus, and at the same time being held in some contempt at the convention because I was not one of the enthusiastic supporters of the no-strike pledge. But I had strong feelings about both matters, and I held my ground whatever the price. I finished helping with the convention, but with much-diminished enthusiasm and interest. Sorely disappointed, I no longer believed I was working for the black cause. (89)

The concept of Communism in this context is placed in opposition to blackness³⁸. Grillo's participation in the organization, therefore, is an affront to the community with whom he both identifies and claims to support. His divided allegiances with regard to this matter underscores his insecurities about not being Black enough. When the convention ends, Grillo immediately breaks ties with the group. This decision, however, does not help his reputation as a rebel on campus, for he "was not trusted in asserting [his] individuality outside the campus on [his] own" (89). As a result, Grillo graduates with a *cum laude* instead of a *magna cum laude*. The author's positioning between two opposing viewpoints—one Black and one Communist—ultimately results in him being placed in a marginalized position within what he considers his "in-group" (Xavier University is a Historically Black University). In his attempts to defend Black rights, his authenticity as a Black man is questioned. Despite the author's disappointment about his mistreatment, he still credits the university for its impact on his formation as an activist:

In the perspective of the years, however, it is not appropriate or necessary to focus on the negative aspects of my largely pleasant years at Xavier. Xavier took me in, one of many penniless if deserving young people of college age. It provided me with a superb education, which I have used advantageously for my own growth in life, for my family's benefit and, I hope, for the benefit of the many communities that I have served. . . I

³⁸ Although Communists initially supported the fight against racism and discrimination, their stances on how to achieve equality were often perceived as too liberal for such Black American groups as the NAACP. Communists advocated the use of mass militant protest to secure civil rights. Most Communists did not distinguish the proletariat struggle from the black cause because, for them, both justified a total political and economic restructuring of society. On the other hand, as Eric Rise notes, many Black organizations felt that civil rights for Black Americans could only be achieved through a gradual erosion of segregation and discrimination through legal means (60). Many Black organizations did not want to change American social order, but rather they wanted to be included in it. This difference in ideology created a wide gap between Blacks and Communists; the latter was often perceived as too radical. Still, there were several prominent Blacks such as Paul Robeson and A. Phillip Randolph that were members of the Communist Party. The Party's support of the Soviet Union in World War II further alienated Blacks. African Americans feared that Communists were more interested in supporting their political interests overseas than in standing up for racial equality at home.

remind myself frequently that my college education came about because Mr. Martin and a multitude of others cared enough about what “a southern colored boy can do.”(89-90) Although the author regrets the turn of events at Xavier, he still insists upon defining himself as a “southern colored boy” (90). The weight that Grillo places upon black authenticity demonstrates an appropriation of blackness that propels him to defend Black rights and the African American institutions that have aided in his development as both a Black man and an advocate for marginalized peoples.

Like Grillo, Piri Thomas struggles with the issue of authenticity, but only as it relates to his father. As mentioned in the previous section, Thomas criticizes his father for not accepting the fact that, in an American context, he is considered a Black man. In the passage that follows, he chastises James for his insistence upon his Puerto Ricanness despite his phenotype: “You protect your lying dream with a heavy strain for a white status that’s worthless to a black man. You protect your dream, Poppa, protect it, but that’s all it is—just a dream. You gonna have to wake up to the fact that you ain’t white. . . There’s pride galore in being a Negro” (151). Although Thomas acknowledges that blackness is an imposed identity, he tells his father that it is not something about which he should feel shame. The authenticity that Thomas is describing here is different from that of Grillo; in essence, he is asking his father to turn away from the falsehood of white supremacy within the Puerto Rican culture, and come to terms with the reality of the racial categorizations in the United States. For this reason, when James discusses his pride in being Puerto Rican, Thomas responds by asking, “Poppa, don’t you know where you at?” (151). His father is not able to adapt completely to the racial “rules” of the United States because he has chosen to embrace the concept of race in Puerto Rico. On the island, there is a preference toward whiteness as the latter is synonymous with wealth and social mobility. By “whitening”

oneself through marriage or economic success, one can transcend the limitations imposed by physical blackness. This concept is challenged on the mainland, where one's race is determined by his or her phenotype. Given his struggles with White authority figures, Thomas decides that embracing his father's racial "dream" is an impossibility for him. The hardships associated with blackness cannot be overcome with denial, but rather through acceptance.

Thomas's journey towards self-acceptance, however, is not without some self-abnegation. Confronted with discrimination, the young man develops an anger and hatred of Whites and their institutions. This is evidenced by his response to the racism he experiences in Long Island. He is rejected by a young Caucasian woman at a school dance because of his dark skin. This event causes him to quit school altogether, and thereby initiates a trend of rebelling against White authority. One of the ways in which Thomas retaliates against Whites is through his sexual encounters with White women. As mentioned in the previous section, Thomas's identity is informed by his hypermasculinity and bravery. In Chapter One, I surmised that one of the greatest fears of the White man in his proximity to the Black man was the latter's ability to deflower or soil the White woman's purity. Fanon discusses this phenomenon further in his psychoanalysis, *Black Skin, White Masks*. According to the Martinican thinker, it is the Black man's innermost desire to be White. This yearning is connected with an internalized inferiority complex that results from the dehumanizing practice of slavery. If to be Black means to be subhuman, then whiteness is synonymous with humanity. Fanon posits then that out of a desire to share in the White man's humanity and thereby to avenge his dehumanization, some Black men seek out sexual relationships with White women: "Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white . . . who but a white woman can do this for me? [...]"

When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine” (84). Thus, the conquest of whiteness puts the Black man on equal footing with the White man; it is the White woman who gives him status, value and therefore whiteness.

In *Down These Mean Streets*, Thomas discusses three encounters with White women. The first is with Betty, a young woman that he meets while working as a kitchen attendant at Pilgrim State Hospital. They initiate a relationship almost immediately, not caring about the reactions they receive from outsiders. Thomas even takes her to Harlem and introduces her to his family and friends, all of whom get along with her well. The relationship is eventually dissolved, however, after the couple returns home from New York. Two people seated near the couple refer to Thomas as a “nigger.” This angers the author so much that he almost initiates a physical altercation with one of the men. Betty pulls him back, and they go to a field where Thomas has sex with her:

We got off in Babylon and found a field, and I made love to her. In anger, in hate, I took out my madness on her. She understood and kept saying, ‘I don’t care what they think—I love you, I love you.’ But inside me I kept saying, *Damn it, I hate you—no, not you, just your damn color. My God, why am I in the middle?* (91).

Thomas takes out his anger on a White woman because she is what he himself cannot be. His frustration about her color and those of her racial group is placed alongside his own unusual positioning as a man in-between two distinct identities.

The racism that Thomas faces is a direct cause of what Fanon terms as a *neurosis* (*Black Skin, White Masks* 42). This condition is defined as a constant paranoia that results from the Black individual’s experience of devaluation and subjection. Although Fanon describes neurosis as a phenomenon experienced to some degree by persons of all cultures and races, he asserts that

this condition manifests itself in the Black man in a unique way: “Since the racial drama is played out in the open, the black man has no time to ‘make it unconscious’...The Negro’s inferiority or superiority complex or feeling of equality is conscious. These feelings forever chill him. They make his drama. In him there is none of the affective amnesia characteristic of the typical neurotic.”(*Black Skin, White Masks* 150). What Fanon is suggesting here is that the Black man’s neuroticism is displayed not in the form of behaviors with hidden causes, but rather as a function of lived experience. This neurosis is a constant reality for Thomas as he navigates his way into adulthood. In the chapter entitled “Learning Some New ABCs,” the writer describes a pseudo-sexual encounter with a woman on the subway. While on the train, he is wedged in between an Asian man and a White woman. The train’s movement pushes the young man into the woman, which causes him to become sexually excited. Willing himself to calm down, Thomas apologizes to her. She smiles at him, and begins to press herself onto him. He looks at her and is instantly attracted to her “paddy-fair” (137) face. The couple silently goes through the motions of a sexual act without penetration. Later that evening, while taking a shower, Thomas relives the encounter and then wonders what the woman might be thinking. He writes,

I wondered if the broad was rememberin’ how great it was, or if she was tellin’ her friends how she made a horny Porty Rican climb the side of the wall on a subway train just by wiggling her white snatch against his black cock. I frowned. I’d thought “black cock,” and that meant the broad was prob’ly sayin’ “nigger” instead of “Porty Rican.”(141)

The fiction that Thomas constructs is merely a manifestation of his neurosis. In his mind, the woman recalls their encounter with shame. Although he is satisfied with the story he imagines, he still is angry about what he perceives to be the woman’s reaction towards him: “But inside

me, I felt hot and real stink about this funny world and all the funny people in it”(141). While the spontaneity of the event excites the woman of Thomas’s imagination, it is the fact that he is Black that makes the encounter a forbidden pleasure. That he projects his shame and self-consciousness onto the woman demonstrates an internalized paranoia that manifests itself constantly in Thomas’s thought life and in his lived experiences. The author’s use of the word “stink” is also significant. He is physically cleaning himself, but thinking about the encounter—or, rather, about what the woman may be thinking about the encounter—makes him feel dirty and angry. As we shall see later, Thomas uses this anger as a means to bring about the same humiliation that he himself feels due to his blackness.

Thomas’s final encounter with a White woman occurs after he journeys to the South with his friend Brew in order to discover the root of the racism that he is experiencing. Having been separated from Brew on a previous trip, he lands in Texas where he decides he wants to “break out against this two-tone South and . . . fuck a white woman...”(187). Once off the ship, he meets a Mexican who takes him to a brothel and advises him to not speak English if he wants to pass as Puerto Rican. He has sex with a White prostitute, and afterwards reveals to her that he is actually a Black man. This act of deception is a form of retaliation against the discrimination he faces in the South. Nevertheless, it is questionable that Thomas, in this instance, is truly exacting any revenge. Although the woman is a prostitute, she is still White. According to researcher A. B. Schwartz, it was not uncommon for White men to come to Harlem specifically to solicit Black female prostitutes (10). The act of sleeping with an African American woman released White men from the monotony daily living and gave them a taste of the exotic (Schwartz 10). It is reasonable to suggest, then, that Thomas’s decision to sleep with a White woman as a form of revenge is in response to this phenomenon. That is, Thomas uses the White prostitute in the same

way that Black women have been historically used by White men.

If we are to look at Thomas's encounters with White women as a trajectory, we see that the author has gone from being a victim to becoming one who intentionally avenges his own dehumanization. In doing so, he himself engages in behaviors that may be considered inhumane. Thomas refuses to accept his father's notion of blackness by expressing his own. However, his expression of blackness involves a violent assault on whiteness that shrouds a hidden self-hate. It is this hatred of self and of his skin color that leads Thomas into a downward spiral of excessive drug use, alcohol abuse, criminal activity and ultimately, prison. Despite its negative effect on Thomas's well being, the moral decline is an essential part of his development as a Black Puerto Rican, and most importantly, as a human. The author's disdain for his color is a reflection of an internalized acknowledgement of White supremacy. To overcome the falsehood of inferiority, therefore, Thomas must reach his lowest point so that he is forced to face the reality of who he is apart from American society's perception of him. This occurs in prison on the night before his last hearing. Anxious to leave the jail, Thomas prays in his cell and pours out his heart to God. It is through this prayer that he gains a newfound sense of freedom: "I began to feel better inside, like God had become Pops and Moms to me. I felt like I was someone that belonged to somebody who cared. I felt like I could even cry if I wanted to, something I hadn't been able to do for years"(317). Although Thomas's spiritual experience does not provoke an instantaneous change, it does initiate a process of rehabilitation in which he is gradually able to turn from his dark past.

Seeing that his old friend Carlitos has turned to drug abuse also has a profound effect on him. Thomas writes, "I was a kid yesterday and my whole world was yesterday. I ain't got nothing but today and a whole lot of tomorrows" (330). The notion of "tomorrow" represents

possibility. This same meaning can also be conferred to the sad bolero that is playing as Thomas walks away from Carlitos at the end of the autobiography. According to Iris Zavala, boleros are considered “agents of social redemption and the locus for social reconciliation...” (190).

Although it is unclear by the end of the autobiography whether Thomas has reached the point of complete rehabilitation, the concept of tomorrow in conjunction with the bolero implies the possibility of a mediation or acceptance of a liminal racial space.

While Evelio Grillo does not endure the same fate as Thomas, he too must also undergo a process of transformation. His time in the military teaches him the importance of Black unity in the face of discrimination. Grillo is chosen as leader among the members of his Black troops, which forces him to become a voice for his fellow shipmates. After leaving the military, he completes three years of graduate study in Latin American History at Columbia University. That he pursues a degree in this area is significant. The support he receives from the African American community, as well as his tenure in the Black educational system, drives him to graduate school. Upon finishing the degree, he takes a position as director of the Alexander Community Center in Oakland, California, where he works with a mix of Mexican-Americans and Black Americans living in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. His experiences in the war and his schooling prepare him to put his “uncommon background to use” (130) and serve as a bridge between the Spanish-speaking and Black communities. During his tenure at the Community Center, Grillo remarks that the knowledge he gained in his relationships with his clients and the volunteers moved him “far beyond the self-centered, assumed competence of a young man not so long out of school and the military” (130). Grillo has been transformed from a self-focused youth to one that is socially conscious. To get to this point, he must first learn to live as a Black American. This journey, albeit wrought with difficulties, confusion and isolation,

develops Grillo into a self-determined individual who has not only embraced his blackness, but also his Latinity. It is this duality that allows him to identify with and serve groups that are “generally held in low esteem by the whites in Oakland” (130).

Down These Mean Streets and *Black Cuban Black American* relate two Afro-Latino men’s journeys to self-acceptance. In this chapter, we have seen how the main characters navigate the troubled waters of racism and racial categories by learning to live as Black men in an American context. What begins as an imposed black identity is then appropriated in such a way that allows both Grillo and Thomas to dismantle hegemonic discourses that uphold the concept of White supremacy. Although not as evident in *Down These Mean Streets* as in *Black Cuban Black American*, both authors’ hardships prepare them to become the Afro-Latino role models, leaders and activists that they themselves lacked as adolescents. The act of writing their life stories gives voice to a community of people who have, until recently, remained in utter anonymity. Their autobiographies function not only as narratives that touch upon the traumatic effects of racism on the Afro-Descendants’ communal psyche, but also as historical artifacts that illuminate our understanding of the interrelationships between the Black Latino and African American communities. Aside from these important characteristics, both autobiographies shed light on the reality of racism within the Latino community, a phenomenon with which few non-Latinos are familiar. In revealing social injustices brought about by racism, questioning the validity of current established racial categories, and in putting to narrative the trauma of racial displacement, these men define a new state of being that challenges the notion of a homogenous American melting pot. They, in essence, embody a movement toward the development of a concept of multiculturalism that no longer isolates, but that creates symbiotic relationships between racial and ethnic groups, as well as with nations. While these men did not necessarily

have strong ties to their home islands due to their “uncommon backgrounds,” they were committed to serving as advocates for their people and to making known the social issues in their home islands to American audiences³⁹. What happens, however, when one is disconnected from both the society in which he or she lives, as well as from that of his or her homeland? The chapter that follows will explore further this idea of isolation and displacement as it relates to the idea of a home or a lack thereof.

³⁹ Despite his impact on the Nuyorican Movement, Thomas asserts that he himself did not self-identify as “Nuyorican” because he wanted to avoid being labeled (Cintrón 270). He also remarks that he, along with other Puerto Rican writers on the mainland, have had trouble gaining acceptance among Puerto Ricans on the island. He attributes the bridges that have been built between Puerto Ricans on the island and in the continental United States to the groups’ shared African heritage (Cintrón 270).

CHAPTER FOUR – HOW TO BE AT HOME WHEN YOU’RE NOT AT HOME: FRAMING AFRO-LATINA DISPLACEMENT IN LOIDA MARÍTZA PÉREZ’S *GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME* (2000)

“Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are ‘housed.’ Our soul is an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them...”

-- Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958: xxxvii)

Gloria Anzaldúa defines the home as an in-between space or “an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (1). Home is a contested space for Afro-Latina women who come from nations in which negrophobia continues to exist and race is a fluid phenomenon. Upon arrival into the United States, these women must often confront issues related to racial identity, but they must also contend with the limitations imposed by patriarchal systems both in American society and, by extension, in their own homelands. Furthermore, they must traverse the nebulous labels that this new land attaches to them; they are not just Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, etc., but they are *Latinas*. The problematic nature of this term, as discussed in the Introduction of this study, indicates the ongoing processes of acculturation and transculturation that occur once the Hispanic individual crosses into this new territory. An acceptance of this term – or, in Anzaldúa’s case, an acceptance of the contested spaces in which the Afro-Latina finds herself—involves “a recognition of commonality within the context of difference” (Anzaldúa 2). This process necessitates a look back, or an exodus to home, in which the individual revisits both history and the hidden truths / traumas that define him or her. This, in essence, is the inheritance that many Afro-Latinas have been forced to “squander” for the sake of belonging and incorporating themselves in a middle-class American context. What is bequeathed in the process of forgetting is an emotional and spiritual displacement that leaves one a broken bridge in search of connections to something remotely like

home. Healing, then, involves remembering and reliving the pain so as not to continue the past sins of colonialism (i.e., negrophobia, violence, racism, etc.). It involves forgiving the past so that one can move forward and put down roots (whether in the family home or in a place away from the family). These phenomena are perpetuated in the lives of the main female characters of Loida Maritza Pérez's novel *Geographies of Home* (2000). As the following analysis will demonstrate, these women's memories—good and bad—are the “memorial stones” on which new stories are written and new ways of being are created. These stones then become the bridges on which future generations can establish new beginnings.

The novel tells the story of a large Dominican family that has immigrated to New York in hope of a better life in the United States. Upon arriving, the parents—Aurelia and Papito – quickly come to realize that their inability to speak English, as well as their statuses as immigrants present several obstacles to the American Dream that they have for both themselves and their children. While Papito attempts to provide a safe home for himself and his family by indoctrinating them in his Seventh-Day Adventist faith and enforcing strict guidelines for behavior, he cannot protect his children from the turmoil that penetrates his household. His daughter Beatriz disappears from home, his other daughter Rebecca enters an abusive marriage, and his second oldest daughter Marina is raped and has a nervous breakdown. One of Papito's sons has an affair with his brother's wife, which causes even more tension in the family. Aurelia, who has relied solely on her husband's guidance and his God, desperately wishes to help her children, but feels powerless to do so. Disillusioned by her husband's faith and its ineffectiveness to resolve the family's issues, she returns to her mother Bienvenida's faith in an effort to fix all of her children's problems⁴⁰. She also supernaturally calls upon her seventh child, Iliana, to

⁴⁰ Bienvenida and Aurelia's religion is never clarified in the novel, but it is most likely an African-derived religion such as Santería or Vodoun.

return home from college to reconnect with the family again. Iliana, however, has her own set of problems. When the story opens, the reader not only discovers that a racial slur has been written once again on Iliana's door, but that she has had difficulty with making friends due both to her mixed ancestry and perceived masculinity. Despite her own troubles, Iliana is nevertheless led to return home to her family. Upon arriving at Aurelia and Papito's house, Iliana discovers the chaos that has invaded their household. Her concern for Marina's mental health, as well as for Rebecca and her children forces her to reconsider the tenets of the Christian faith with which she and her siblings had been raised. Confronted with the obstacles of bringing the broken family together, all the members long to return to their roots—to their Dominican Republic—where all is familiar and, in their eyes, paradisiacal. However, as Iliana, Papito and Aurelia discover, home is not necessarily a physical place, but a state of being.

Philosophies of Home

For immigrant women of color in particular, survival in the new land necessitates a reconceptualization of the meaning of home and, ultimately, of the values inherited from the home culture. These processes are not without complications, for these women are often victims of traumas that they must carry with them across borders. Often, these traumas are suppressed and forgotten with the intent of moving forward and fashioning a new and better life.

Nevertheless, the pain of the past threatens the sanctity of this new existence, causing most women and their children to relive patterns of abuse and violence in their new contexts.

Geographies of Home presents to its readers the various means by which Afro-Latina women confront this trauma and walk the line between societal expectations and home traditions. In this novel, the concept of home is construed as a space of contradictions and instability so as to

capture the displacement of Afro-Latina women in an American context. These women, by virtue of their multiple identities, are forced to live as citizens of an in-between space lacking clear boundaries. This way of life often presents obstacles that prevent these characters from fully putting down roots in their new home. This chapter will discuss these obstacles and the means by which these women attempt to overcome them in an effort to survive.

Pérez's novel, by her own admission, is loosely based on the biblical story of the Prodigal Son in Luke, chapter 15. Two of the characters—Aurelia and Iliana—leave their homes only to be drawn back to the home space again to recuperate the cultural / spiritual inheritances that they have squandered in their leave taking. Leaving and returning carry different meanings for each woman. Aurelia departs from her inherited faith and takes on the religion of her husband in search of stability. However, when crisis surfaces in the family, Aurelia must confront her passivity and return to her mother's Afro-Caribbean religion and her roots in an attempt to resolve the family's problems and to pass on truths to her children. Iliana leaves home to pursue an education, but soon find herself displaced due to the racism of her peers. She returns home with the prospect of being embraced and to have “comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her the courage to confront the prejudices she had encountered during eighteen months away” (312). Both women must face and ultimately challenge their past traumas, Dominican definitions of womanhood and patriarchal systems (i.e., Adventist religion) so as to carve out their own paths to self-actualization.

In the study *This Bridge We Call Home*, Gloria Anzaldúa posits that the female immigrant often finds herself in what she terms as *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning “tierra entre medio” or a bridge between two or more worlds (1). In the *nepantla*, transformations happen that often obscure cultural nuances and societal expectations, making it an unstable and

uncomfortable place. She further asserts that women of color, particularly those who have been transplanted from one world to another dwell in nepantla so often that “it becomes a sort of ‘home’”(2). Although dwelling in this space opens the possibility of connecting to new cultures, worlds and people, the transformations that result from such interactions can result in feelings of alarm or fear. Notably, these feelings are not just common to female immigrants moving from one nation to another, but also to women who move from one culture to another. African American feminist bell hooks, when discussing her own experiences as a Black scholar transplanted from her home in Kentucky to California, defines this emotional response as a type of mental exile, or rather, “the condition of feeling split [which causes] a breaking down of the spirit” (*Belonging* 15). She suggests that the healing of that broken spirit involves a remembering of oneself, the act of “taking the bits and pieces of [one’s] life and putting them together again” (*Belonging* 15). hooks achieves this through writing about her childhood, allowing herself to rediscover and essentially “return” home to her roots. Afro-Latina women experience this fragmentation both as a consequence of the conflicting expectations of their cultures and that of their new home space, and of the restrictive nature of racial categories in the United States. To put the pieces back together, these women must learn to negotiate between these often paradoxical nuances. What this involves is a return to “home” via a look back at the traumas, mechanisms of colonialism, and family histories that have all had a role in their identity development. It is in confronting these issues that these women are able to challenge and move toward dismantling the oppressive discourses that have silenced them. Successful maneuvering through this process, however, does not mean that one should disavow all traditional ways of being in favor of modern ones. Rather, it implies that one must learn to build upon her negative and positive experiences to create a life for herself within a unfamiliar context. Once the latter is

accomplished, the woman can utilize the fragmented aspects of her life as “memorial stones” not only to remind herself and others of what she has overcome, but also to build bridges between distinct worlds for future generations.⁴¹ In this chapter, I am particularly interested in how Aurelia and Iliana reexamine their traumatic experiences and utilize them as a basis for constructing new geographies that circumvent the repression that has prevented their self-agency. I begin with a discussion of the patriarchal system—represented by Papito—that has remapped their destinies and caused them to leave their inheritances behind. Then I address each character’s process of homecoming by examining the areas of conflict that they must reconcile / accept in order to break free from harmful cycles of abuse and violence and embrace their *nepantla*. Finally, I look at how each woman must take the idiosyncrasies of their past and present and build bridges (or in Aurelia’s case, become a bridge) between worlds so that they can put down roots in a new home space.

⁴¹ The concept of “memorial stones” originates from Joshua 4:1-9: “And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying: ‘Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from every tribe, and command them, saying, ‘Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.’ Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; and Joshua said to them: ‘Cross over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, ‘What do these stones *mean* to you?’ Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.’ And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the Ark of the Covenant stood; and they are there to this day.” These stones not only represented the names of the tribes of Israel, but also God’s deliverance of the Israelites. In order for them to make a home for themselves in the Promised Land, the Israelites had to have a strong sense of identity and awareness of the obstacles that God had helped them to overcome. These memorial stones also served as a “bridge” for the priests to cross as they carried the Ark of the Covenant, and were visible especially in times of drought.

The struggle to define and love oneself in spite of the imposition of racial epithets and strict gender roles is one that is not uncommon to Afro-Latina women. Therefore, unlike the other chapters in this study, my intent in this chapter is to focus specifically on the growing self-determination of Afro-Latinas. This process involves not only a rejection of socially established racial labels within American and Latino culture, but also a recapitulation of long-held gender roles within the Afro-Latino community. To be clear, my intent is not to write a new theory for understanding Afro-Latina identity since to attempt to do so would be to essentialize an entire group. Instead, I will demonstrate through an analysis of Aurelia and Iliana's developments throughout the text that the struggle for self-definition is an ongoing process for Afro-Latinas who are not only displaced geographically, but also racially and culturally. For these women to be at home when not at home, then, they must question societal norms both in the homeland and the adopted home space. Often, this questioning results in the eventual acceptance of ambiguities inherent in their cultural and social makeups. By coming to terms with the tensions that inform their Afro-Latina identity, both Aurelia and Iliana can move toward a transcendence of racial and sexual injustice through resistance and forgiveness, and ultimately, be at home.

Mapping the mujer in *Geographies of Home*: A Family Portrait

Pérez's novel focuses primarily on three generations of Dominican women who have been affected by the Trujillo regime. While the dictator does not take center stage in the novel as in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, his presence is felt in the visage of Papito. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, Trujillo's government was a patriarchal system founded on the concept of *dominicanidad*, an ideology that defined Dominicaness along the lines of Spanish heritage and Catholicism. Through a campaign laced with violent uprisings,

kidnappings, promises of a better future for the working class, false alliances and religious propaganda, Trujillo maintained control over the island for thirty-one years.⁴² The dictator's regime created an environment in which violence and fear became fixtures of daily existence. Trujillo justified his violent acts by establishing himself as the protector of the Dominican people. Eugenio Matibag, in his study *Haitian – Dominican Counterpoint: Nation, Race and State on Hispaniola*, asserts that Trujillo sought to protect the Dominican people from Haitian influence (145). He felt that the Haitian presence in the nation threatened the purity of the Dominican language, culture and race. To resolve this issue, Trujillo attempts to remap the Dominican Republic by both establishing a clearer cultural and physical border between it and Haiti, and by modernizing the nation to put it in a comparable position with other world economic systems. Ironically, the methods that Trujillo employs to modernize the nation are implemented on the basis of traditional values. The dictator's motto *God and Trujillo* not only exemplifies the leader's megalomaniacal tendencies, but it also demonstrates the dictator's need to use traditionalist ideals of Catholicism as a means of exercising control over his people.

Furthermore, the dictator portrays himself as a self-made man who, through his own hard work, has managed to achieve greatness.⁴³ In a speech directed toward the countrymen in the remote areas of the island, Trujillo makes his approval of the hard workers known: "My best friends are the men of work" (Turits 1). This message pierces the heart of the peasantry, who view the leader as one who is personally invested in working for the interests of the working class. Richard Turits asserts that it is the working man that defends and keeps Trujillo in power (1). Despite the overwhelming support from the working class, Trujillo's regime crumbles due

⁴² Although Trujillo was assassinated in 1961, the effects of his regime remain even today. Richard Turits notes that Trujillo's support of the working class had such an effect on peasants that the latter's support of the dictator continued for decades after his death (3).

⁴³ See the historical background information on Trujillo's regime beginning on page 77 of this study.

to the leader's corrupt policies and the threat that his economic policies present to the United States. Even after his death, however, his legacy of corruption, abuse, and fear tactics continued to plague the island for decades. This atmosphere—and the fear that sustains it—is also perpetuated in the household that Papito creates in the novel. His fear of New York and of the American influence compels Papito to protect his family at whatever cost. He resorts to the Seventh-Day Adventist faith as a means to control his children and to, in his mind, secure their spiritual destinies:

What had appealed to him about Adventist doctrine was its specificity in distinguishing right from wrong. In a country where both had shifted according to a tyrant's whim and little had offered relief or hope, religion had granted him salvation, unmediated access to the divine, and steadfast rules by which to live. These he had offered to his children as a buffer against poverty and pain. He had hoped, with the promise of heaven, to shield them from disappointment in this world. (149)

Ironically, Papito's intents to provide stability for his family results in greater instability due to his abusive and volatile nature. While Papito's abuse and unwavering faith has the effect of distancing him from the rest of the family, it does not have the desired result of preventing evil from entering the family home. In fact, his adherence to strict black-white concept of right and wrong projects onto the family a paradoxical perception of morality that in turn hinders many of the childrens' ability to make a home in the United States. This paradox is further perpetuated in the father's name—Papito—a term that is often used to show affection. While Papito has good intentions for his family, his inability to reconcile the need to provide them with all the comforts of American living and the drive to protect them from the negative influences of American society results in the members' emotional and physical displacement. Like Trujillo, Papito's

attempt at remapping his family results in the latter's ultimate resistance and adherence to false notions of security and home. This realization strikes him gradually throughout the novel as he watches his daughter Marina slip further and further into madness, his son commit adultery with his brother's wife, his daughters Iliana and Beatriz leave the home and his daughter Rebecca move from one abusive relationship to another. In essence, it is Papito's position as father and authoritarian that affects each woman's emotional and cultural mapping in the novel.

Papito's history is characterized by contradictions. Not long after his conversion to the Seventh-Day Adventist faith, Papito's father dies. His sudden death cultivates in Papito a deep loneliness and a desire for a wife to help him make a home for himself on the island. One day, he spots Anabelle, one of the most coveted women in the village. He falls in love with her, and makes plans to meet her. Papito eventually meets her unexpectedly in the middle of a hurricane. Seeing the young woman in danger, he runs to rescue her to discover that she is not only mortally injured, but also pregnant. It is the news of the pregnancy that pushes Anabelle to go out into the storm and attempt to commit suicide. Anabelle's death after Papito's heroic attempt to save her fills him with guilt that haunts him decades later:

He hid the hands that had seized Anabelle and, years later, embraced Aurelia, carried their children, changed their diapers, tickled their bellies until laughter sputtered from their lips . . . They had held forth a promise that he would catch them, that his arms were strong enough to lift them up and to bear their weight should they trip over their own feet. Yet, one by one, his children had fallen so far beyond his reach that he had come to doubt his ability to protect them. (162)

The feelings of failure that overwhelm Papito have two major effects on him. First, he is compelled to "live penitently in order to redeem himself before God" (162). In essence, Papito

feels an obligation to continue in the faith with the intent of somehow justifying himself before God. Second, his incapacity to forgive himself results in a continued pattern of failures and contradictions. Papito is a deacon whose responsibility is “to ensure that guests and members [feel] at home” (121). Nevertheless, he himself is never able to fully plant himself in the United States.

Papito’s emotional displacement and his inability to detach himself from his guilt are even made manifest within the family’s physical space. Although he does succeed at providing a roof over his family’s heads, he constantly moves them from one house to another. The final house in which the family lives is described as “the comfort of their [Papito and Aurelia’s] old age, the anchor in their children’s lives” (22). However, when Iliana comes to visit the house after not having been home for over a year, she notices that the house is different:

It was yellow now—a bright canary-yellow which drew attention to itself, unlike the dull red of the brick facing which had covered its exterior. New too were the white iron fence and gate leading to the stoop. . . She had expected to find the house cloaked in mourning and somehow, as she approached it, to get a sense of what waited for her inside. Yet, despite the news she had received, the house seemed festive. And compared with neighboring buildings, grey and stooped like the bodies of old men, her parents’ residence appeared deceptively new. (27)

Besides being distinct from the other residences in the neighborhood, the house reflects a reality that is contrary to what is occurring within its walls. Once inside, Iliana notices the living room’s eclectic décor. The room seems smaller in size, and all of the furniture from the Dominican Republic is now replaced with “tables with gold-tinted latticed bases and red and gold fringed lamps” all covered in plastic (30). To the young woman, “the room seemed a version of what her

parents believed a rich person's house, or at least an American's, might look like" (30).

Ironically, Papito and Aurelia's attempts to "Americanize" their home not only make the house stand out among the other homes in the neighborhood, but they also make the house less comfortable. By covering the furniture in plastic to maintain it, Aurelia and Papito have prevented any true usage of the items. This house, which is to be a source of comfort in the parents' old age and anchor for the children, is a small, stifling environment full of displaced, unusable objects. Papito and Aurelia, in an effort to preserve the façade of a typical American household, have stifled expression of the family's Dominican identity.

Aside from creating an uncomfortable physical space, the home's new décor also provokes a sense of emotional displacement in Iliana. To her, the remodeled home does not reflect "the warmth of the Caribbean sun magically transported to New York" (30), neither does it contain "objects lovingly carved by the inhabitants of an island she had dreamed of" (30). Rather, it is a convoluted manifestation of the parents' misperceptions of American living. This exaggeration is further exacerbated by the white fence that surrounds the entire house; though it is comparable to the white picket fence that most associate with the American dream home, it is made of iron which, in the context of the novel, serves as a symbol of contradictory meanings. According to the *Dictionary of Symbols*, iron not only represents masculine hardness and the brutality of war, but it is also connected to the idea of slavery (Tressider 252). Although the iron fence is a manifestation of Papito's hardness and his desire to protect his family from the negative influences of American society, its presence around the home is also indicative of the smothering effect that Papito's religious fervor and strict nature have on the rest of the family. The fact that the interior of the family home makes Iliana feel uncomfortable illustrates the alienating effect that the parents' desire to achieve their perception of the American Dream has

on the young woman. This sense of alienation is common among all the family members—including Papito himself—and prevents them from both truly settling into their new home and facing the difficulties that threaten to tear the family apart.

Despite removing the Dominican furniture from the home, neither Papito nor Aurelia hide the fact that they long to return to the island. Papito constantly revisits the idea of buying a farm in the Dominican Republic to provide both he and his family with a comfortable place to live. As tensions rise in the household, Papito realizes that his faith is no longer enough to keep the family together and his desire to move back to the island intensifies. The faith that was to be for him a buffer against the pain of his past and his unfulfilled dreams does not prevent his children from experiencing their own share of disappointments and pain. Hence, the prospect of reestablishing a life in the Dominican Republic allows Papito to escape the familial dysfunction that surrounds him.

Aurelia, on the other hand, serves as a counterpoint to Papito's authoritative demeanor. She is the loving parent that accepts her children and tries to maintain peace in the home. At the beginning of the novel, she is subdued and subservient to her husband. Although she does not always condone his behavior or his decisions, she chooses to support and depend upon him for guidance:

...whenever misfortune had crept into their lives, she had leaned on him for support. She had relied on the strength he'd feigned even when he too had been exhausted and overwhelmed. Should one of their children have required discipline, she had waited for him to administer it when he came home from work. When it became obvious that their children needed a rock to stand on in this world, she had left it to him to introduce them

to his God. Had they been about to be evicted, had a daughter chosen an inappropriate spouse or a son gotten into trouble, she had depended on him for solutions. (146).

Aurelia's complete reliance on Papito is a direct result of her fear of her mother's faith and power. Although Bienvenida's belief system is never named in the novel, the extent of Bienvenida's power and authority in light of the circumstances created by the Trujillo regime is extraordinary: ". . . her mother commanded more respect than the migrant priest who visited once a month. She was the one who, as midwife, presided over births and deaths. She was also the one who initiated rituals to appease the prematurely dead and give hope to their survivors. On most days her house creaked with the traffic of those seeking her advice" (132). Bienvenida's position as a spiritual authority figure is much higher than that of the migrant priest, a representative of Trujillo's Catholic regime.⁴⁴ However, it is not the extent of Bienvenida's power that frightens Aurelia about her mother's faith. Rather, it is the ambiguities prevalent in the religion that compel her to turn from it and to embrace her husband's faith. She clings to Papito's God without completely believing in him because she "preferred to believe in a death that laid spirits out to rest and in a God Who would one day reward those who had suffered. She did not want to consider that after dying she too might continue yearning or seeking answers to what she did not understand" (133). Afro-Caribbean spirituality does not promise the same finality as Christianity. While Christians believe in the soul's departure to heaven or hell upon death and in Christ's eventual return to earth to resolve the world's problems, practitioners of many Afro-Caribbean religions believe in the evolution of the individual. A person is never cured, but rather healed so that he or she can cope with his or her wounds and help others to do the same. Death does not

⁴⁴ It is of note that although Bienvenida's religion is never clearly specified, some studies of the novel have speculated that she practices *santería* or *vodoun*, both African-derived religions (Kevane 90, Kiss 4). During Trujillo's regime, outward practice of any African-derived religion was condemned and perceived as anti-Dominican (Lundius and Lundahl 596-597). Therefore, the fact that Bienvenida's power transcends that of the dictator is significant here.

always imply that one go on to the afterlife; the dead may attempt to communicate with the living or even possess a person to attain what they could not acquire in life (De la Torre, *Santería* 22). The possibility for unrest after death concerns Aurelia because it does not promise the stability and comfort for which she longs. Living in a cultural context where discord is a part of daily existence, both Papito and Aurelia are desirous of certainty and peace. While Papito finds this security in the black-white beliefs of Adventism, Aurelia attempts to gain it through the promise of heaven and eternal reward. Moreover, the traumatic experiences resulting from the second sight that she and her brother inherit from her mother also play a role in her decision to convert to Adventism. According to Aurelia, “this ability [the ability to see and hear the spirits] had driven her brother mad and had tormented her into seeing and hearing when others couldn’t” (134). Consequently, she vows neither to follow in her mother’s traditions nor to reveal her past to her husband. She marries Papito and abandons her childhood home with the hopes of acquiring a sense of stability in her life.

During her final visit to her mother’s home, Aurelia rejects the gifts that Bienvenida gives her: a quilt made up of fabric from dead family members (“because the future can hurt if you deny the past”), a fistful of earth (“*to which we return to nourish those who follow*”), a jug sitting in the dirt corked to hold water (“*to remind you that in our blood we carry the power of the sea*”), a clear piece of glass reflecting rainbow colors (“*because beauty exists in the most unlikely places*”), a stone resembling Bienvenida’s face, a wishbone, a scroll of bark and an owl’s feather (“*to quell your fear of darkness and teach your spirit that it can soar*”) (132-134). These gifts are all symbolic of the tests that Aurelia must endure as she journeys from her childhood home to the United States to make a new home for herself and her children; not only must she eventually come to terms with her gift and allow herself to put down roots in a foreign

place, but she must also pass on the truth of her history on to her children so that they too can survive in their new home. Although the finality offered by the Christian faith promises Aurelia some solace from the unanswered questions left by her mother's religion, it is not enough to resolve her children's crises as they grow older. This realization, in addition to the fact that she herself can never fully come to believe in Papito's God, causes her spiritual impotence and contributes to her emotional displacement: "As she delved into the past she was conscious of something missing in the present –something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children. She could not identify what it was, but its absence was felt as acutely as hunger pangs"(23). Critic Bridget Kevane remarks that Aurelia's decision to reject her mother's gifts "leads her to believe that she has failed her family and, in ignoring her rightful legacy, has somehow contributed to the destruction within her family" (90). Eventually, the emptiness and spiritual impotence that Aurelia feels forces her to return *home* to her spiritual roots to reclaim her inheritance, and, in her mind, rescue her daughters.

Upon discovering that her daughter Marina has been hospitalized for attempting suicide and that Rebecca has every intent on returning to her husband despite the continued abuse, Aurelia decides that she must take matters into her own hands. Before she can help her children, Aurelia must deal with her own fear of settling in the United States and accept her role in her daughters' situations:

Throughout more than fifteen years of moving from apartment to apartment, she had dreamed, not of returning, but of going home. Of going home to a place not located on any map but nonetheless preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind

able to accommodate any place as home. . . She felt her soul expand to accommodate her grief for Marina who had tried to end the life she had barely begun to live. She accepted full responsibility for this daughter's choice prompted by her own negligence as well as by her hope that the next day, if not the next or the next, all problems would miraculously resolve themselves. (137)

It is at this point in the novel that Aurelia begins to recognize that her submissiveness and her blind trust in her husband have helped to produce the chaos in her children's lives. This moment is pivotal for two main reasons. First of all, Aurelia's epiphany signals the beginning of a process of repentance. According to Christian theology, repentance involves a turning away from old vices (rejecting her mother's faith) and turning toward a new path of renewed righteousness (returning to her roots). This step is necessary for restoration to begin since repentance "implies a future that is not bound to the habits and vices of the past" (Etzioni and Carney 39). Secondly, in acknowledging her passivity, she is able to forgive her husband's abusive and authoritative behavior: "Exhaling, she expelled the resentment she had harbored toward her husband. From that day on she would hold only herself accountable. She would no longer depend on anyone else to do for her or her children what she should have taken it upon herself to do" (137). The concurrent processes of repentance and forgiveness ultimately shift Aurelia's perspective of home and free her to take hold again of her prenatal powers. As Marilyn Kiss asserts in her analysis of the female characters in the novel, Aurelia epitomizes the Prodigal Daughter in that she has "'squandered' [her] inheritance and must return 'home' to reclaim it and to re-enter into communion with [her] family and [her] heritage in order to be complete" (4).

Renewed and determined, Aurelia immediately goes to rescue her daughter Marina, who has been hospitalized after attempting suicide. In this scene, the mother uses the power of her

voice to guide her daughter back to life. Here, Aurelia is employing the same power that she uses to lead Iliana back to the family home. As she speaks to Marina, Aurelia reminds her of her best childhood memories “to convey that although pain and sadness existed in the world there was also beauty and even joy”(143). She also tells her daughter truths about herself and Papito. Aurelia addresses her own regret at not being able to provide for her daughter’s needs. As he mother speaks, Marina is removed from the clutches of death and is lifted into her mother’s arms where she is alive and safe. It is this safety net that gives Marina the urge and the ability to live again: “As she took in all the oxygen her lungs could hold, she saw what appeared to fireflies flickering in the dark. . .In their light, she recognized herself and her mother too. Her mother cradling her like when she was young. Her mother whispering in her ears so that she would know she was not alone”(144). What is described here is a type of regression. Marina returns to life, and does so as a child. As Kathy Brown has noted in her studies of Haitian Vodou, many healing ceremonies involve “ritual regression, a regression to infancy and then a movement back, or even a ritual rebirth not entirely unlike that which is accomplished through the initiation ceremonies” (25). In Santería, experiences of death and rebirth are part of the healing process. Healing in this context means that the individual is not cured of his or her wounds, but rather learns to live with and change his or her perception of the woundedness (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 235). Aurelia’s intervention, therefore, opens the possibility for Marina’s healing and ultimately her recovery from her mental illness.

Motivated by her newfound strength, Aurelia decides to use her abilities to save Rebecca and her grandchildren once and for all from Pasi3n, her daughter’s abusive husband. While preparing a family meal, she engages in a ritual that results in Pasi3n’s death. This act gives Aurelia a renewed sense of accomplishment and hope that her family problems can be resolved:

Having conjured death, Aurelia stood respectfully in its presence. Only when her son-in-law gave a final jolt did she tread on the feathers scattered throughout her kitchen floor and reach for a broom with which she wearily began to sweep. . . To her surprise, she noticed that it had begun to snow. . . Her grandchildren would be beside themselves with joy. She imagined the laughter that would ring from their lips like bells. Her pleasure extended to the prospect of having her married children reunited in her home. In honor of the occasion they would drop their grudges outside her door. They would submit to her embrace and to that of the siblings they often chose not to see. (256)

In this passage, the feathers in the death / kitchen scene correspond to the falling of the snow. It is the joy promised by the snow that covers / overshadows the death that Aurelia has conjured. Although Aurelia questions her decision to kill her son-in-law later in the novel, she believes at this moment that her actions—motivated by love and a maternal need to protect her children and grandchildren—are justified. As the fresh snow falls, it covers the “ash-hued snow covering her yard” (256). In the same way, Aurelia believes that Pasi3n’s murder will restore peace to her family and cover the multitude of sins and evil that have separated her children from one another and from her. In essence, returning to her mother’s faith not only renews her, but it opens the door for possible reconciliation with and among her children.

Despite her powerful interventions, it becomes evident that even Aurelia’s powers are unable to resolve all of her daughters’ problems. When Marina rapes Iliana at the end of the novel, Aurelia blames herself for not having discerned her youngest daughter’s fate:

Heady from her victory over Pasi3n, she had assumed that everything pertaining to her family could be brought under her direct control. She had purposefully forgotten the many times she had been unable to curb Marina’s violence. Worse, she had relied on the

caprice of preternatural senses to inform her of impending danger when common sense alone should have alerted her to the risk inherent in keeping under her wing a daughter whose delusions enabled her to justify the most atrocious acts. (292)

Not only does Iliana's rape reveal the extent of Marina's madness and her propensity for violence, but it also uncovers Aurelia's potential for violence. It is Marina's horrific act that alerts her mother to the dangerous implications of her own powers. This realization convinces Aurelia that she is no different from her daughter and that, therefore, the attack on Iliana "had been fate's perverse retribution for her crime" (293). Moreover, she is reminded that nothing—not even her powers—can promise the stability for which she herself had once sacrificed her own beliefs. Both the violent nature of Pasi3n's murder and her inability to prevent Iliana's rape make Aurelia question her powers, as well as her maternal judgment. She begins to lose hope not only in the faith that has been passed on to her by her mother, but also in the possibility of ever being able establish a sense of security for her family. Again, the attempt at "homecoming"—or the return to her mother's traditions—does not promise the safety and the resolution that Aurelia expects. Instead, she is made more aware of the unresolved problems in her family.

Toward the end of the novel, Aurelia is reminded of the gifts that her mother bestowed upon her, but cannot understand the meaning behind them. This loss of memory indicates that, despite her decision to return to her mother's faith, she has yet to complete her process of homecoming. It is only when she is speaking to her grandchildren—who have been abandoned by their mother Rebecca—that she realizes what her mother had attempted to give her. P3rez writes:

She also thought of the many more things she had never revealed to her children or her grandchildren: details of their own and of their family's past which might have helped

better understand themselves as well as the world through which they moved. The silence enveloping these legacies, the half-truths meant to gloss over and protect, the falsehoods uttered for fear of causing pain, and the inability or unwillingness to speak, now seemed to her to have inflicted greater harm. (298)

Aurelia's desire to talk to her children and grandchildren illustrates a shift from a passive observer of the family's trauma to that of an active, concerned parent. She now sees the damage that silence has done to both herself and her children, and realizes that the only means to cope with the trauma is to address it openly. Chantal Kalisa, in her study of violence in Francophone Caribbean literature, asserts that literary narratives of trauma are written with the intent of repairing and healing the wounded (13). She further claims that "women's literature about trauma [is] a form of knowledge production that attempts to denormalize violence against women, to reconstruct intergenerational narratives of female trauma, and to offer, albeit in narrative form, a record of resistance to violence"(14). In talking to her grandchildren and confronting the falsehoods that their mother has told them, Aurelia hopes to shield them from guilt about their mother's departure and to provide them with the tools they need to overcome their tragic circumstances. By knowing the past, the grandchildren have a better chance of avoiding the mistakes of their predecessors. Truth, then, is the one antidote that can bring about healing, forgiveness and, ultimately, stability for the family. This phenomenon is explained in the construction of the family quilt that Aurelia leaves behind.

Having come to terms with this new revelation, Aurelia attempts to explain to her grandchildren that they are not responsible for their mother's departure. However, in talking to them, she realizes that they do not have the capacity to understand Rebecca's reasons for wanting to continue in an abusive relationship and that she does not have the words to make

them empathize with their mother. Sensing her grandmother's frustration, Soledad, the youngest granddaughter, embraces and rocks her. This act of tenderness reminds Aurelia of her mother's last two pronouncements about the gifts she passes on to her: *"To remind you that in our blood we carry the power of the sea. . . To quell your fear of darkness and teach your spirit that it can soar* (299). That Soledad embraces and rocks the grandmother is significant. First, the name "Soledad" means loneliness, which accurately epitomizes the isolation that Aurelia feels as a result of her own guilt and impotency as a parent. Secondly, it is ironic that it is the youngest child that takes the maternal role in the scene. In essence, Soledad's act of maternal love incenses a flicker of hope in the grandmother that her grandchildren will survive despite Rebecca's inability to nurture. The grandchildren's subsistence will depend not on their mother's deeds, but on the inner strength bestowed to them via their bloodline. It is only when Aurelia recognizes this that she has the strength to explain to them the truth about their mother, and to give them hope that she will return home to them as a different person. What Aurelia does not realize is that she herself has also "returned home" in a spiritual sense. By embracing her own roots, exercising the powers passed on to her by her mother, acknowledging and sharing her past pains and taking responsibility for her passivity, Aurelia is able to forgive and be forgiven. The embrace she receives from Soledad is, in figurative terms, her own mother embracing her; she is the prodigal daughter who, having squandered her inheritance, has returned home and is welcomed (as demonstrated by the mother's name "Bienvenida"). This "homecoming" is a necessary process not only for Aurelia's development, but also for the healing that will need to take place in Iliana.

From birth, Iliana has always stood out as different from her sisters. First, she breaks the pattern of births in her family:

... all her siblings had been born to form alternate pairs of the same sex . . . although Mauricio and Chaco, Rebecca and Zoraida, Caleb and Emanuel, Nereida and Azucena, Vicente and Gabriel, Marina and Beatriz had each been born two years apart, she herself had refused to come until three years after Beatriz and three before Tico, the youngest child. (4)

It is also believed that, because of the shape of Aurelia's stomach, Iliana is to be born a male. The order in which she is born, as well as her gender makes Iliana an outsider and, in some cases, an invasion in her family. Furthermore, as Lyn Di Iorio Sandín points out in her analysis of the novel, the unusual circumstances surrounding Iliana's birth explain the conflicting expectations that her family has for her during her adult life (64). In essence, she is their "'jucated,' 'prodigal,' daughter—as well as outright contempt" (Sandín 64). In light of these double standards, Iliana often oscillates between compliance to her father's strict rules and rebellion throughout the novel. On the one hand, she believes that it is due to her position in the family that her parents often overlook her:

Caught between a brother and a sister who had received more of everything than she, Iliana tried to come up with a good enough reason to forgive her parents for their preferential treatment of Tico and Beatriz. . . 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. (185)

Ironically, Iliana feels self-contempt for her circumstances of her birth. This self-blame results in an almost compulsive need to please her family during her adolescent years. Despite her attempts to mediate her parents' expectations of her (i.e., to find a good husband, to go to church and to

stay home), she finds that she is never intrinsically able to appease them. This unresolved issue materializes in Iliana's androgynous appearance. She is described as tall and broad-shouldered, possessing small breasts. Men perceive her either as attractive or, because of her walk, a "drag queen in style" (74). Iliana's physical body becomes a point of contention for her throughout the novel, and results in a tendency to be overzealous in her attempts to be more feminine: "She tried to shake off her lingering unease as she tucked her breasts into a bra, stepped into a pair of panties and a floor-length skirt, slipped on a billowing silk shirt. 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" (260).

Iliana's masculinity, however, extends far beyond her physical appearance. Isolated as a consequence of her birth order, she spends the greater part of her teenage years "observing her family and immersing herself in books" (43). These books present Iliana with possibilities other than marriage, and lead her to pursue a college education. While her parents claim to be pleased with her for choosing to go to university, they also resent the Iliana's unwillingness to pursue a husband. This conflict is, as Mary Haller-Sullivan asserts, not uncommon among women of color in academia whose intellectualism affords them a place in the dominant society (in this case, American society) (88). However, in accepting the role of scholar, these women often forfeit membership into their home communities (Haller-Sullivan 88). The isolation afforded by this positioning sometimes causes women to oscillate between rejection of socially-sanctioned gender roles as established by their home space and a tendency towards appeasing those of their home communities. Walking the line between two distinct expectations, Iliana decides to leave her family home in an attempt to determine her own path only to realize that she is not accepted in the academic community because of her race.

Iliana's racial composition is also an area of contention throughout the novel. This is not due to her perception of her race, but rather to others' views of who she is. At the university, Iliana is labeled as a "nigger" due to her skin color (3). She attempts to walk differently because her sisters consider her stride whorish. Instead, Iliana gets in the habit of "walking with her head held high and her eyes staring straight ahead" to appear confident, which earns her the title of "arrogant bitch"(5). Gwendolyn Snearl remarks that Black women's self-confidence is perceived as overconfidence and self-esteem is read as arrogance (128). This phenomenon often makes it difficult for Black women to form connections within their institutions (Snearl 128). Iliana's shyness and her appearance place her in a marginalized position in her school; she receives the same rejection from White students as she does with minority students: "Whenever she had attended parties, even those sponsored by minority organizations, she had never been asked to dance. . . And when she had attended with Ed, rumors had spread that she dated only white men"(5). That Ed is considered White despite being Mexican demonstrates how the perception of race is often linked to one's physical appearance. Moreover, as in her family home, the expectations placed upon Iliana at the university are contradictory. Black enough to be a nigger but not enough of a minority to incorporate herself in the minority community, Iliana is once again forced to relive the isolation of her childhood.

As a child, Iliana often struggles to define her racial identity: "She used to hate the question 'Where you from?' because few of her classmates knew of the Dominican Republic and several of her black friends assumed that she claimed to be Hispanic in order to put on airs"(190). Being physically Black and having a Dominican accent, she is made to feel "like a rope in a game of tug-of-war" (190). Both Hispanics and Blacks attempt to force Iliana to choose a side, but they do so in hostile ways: "Throughout elementary, junior-high and high school, she

had frequently been harassed by black friends for hanging out with greasy spics who in turn questioned why she wanted to be in the company of loud-mouthed spooks”(190-191). This racial tug-of-war is not only indicative of the tensions between Black and Hispanic communities, but also of the isolation that individuals of multiple heritages often experience in the United States due to narrowly defined concepts of race. In essence, Iliana does “not comfortably fit in either [group] and even less in the circles she had found herself in when she finally went away to school”(191). Although it is obvious that she considers herself to be ethnically Dominican, Pérez never once reveals whether Iliana decides to adopt either a purely Latina identity or a Black heritage. What is clear, however, is that she does not have the same prejudices as her sister Marina. From childhood, Iliana’s older sister despises her flat nose, curly red hair and wide lips but envies Iliana’s “white” nose (41). When Marina communicates her desire to marry a White man or a light-skinned Hispanic man due to her disgust of Black men, Iliana chastises her sister’s negative preconceptions:

Iliana whirled around to face her sister. “What are you saying? That blacks are inferior?

Is that what you think about yourself?”

“I’m Hispanic, not black.”

“What color is your skin?”

“I’m Hispanic!” (38)

Marina’s proclamation at the end of the passage echoes that of many dark-skinned Dominicans who, coming from the island, have denied their African heritages due to the anti-black propaganda spread throughout the nation. According to Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández, Dominicans have had to endure centuries of negrophobia although Blacks and mulattoes make up about 90% of the island’s population (143). Marina has spent more time on

the island, and has therefore been indoctrinated in the same negrophobia that Torres-Saillant and Hernández describe. Her rape by a Black man purporting to tell her future cements this rejection of her blackness and transforms it into hatred. Iliana, on the other hand, has had Black friends, read profusely and has ventured outside of the home. Therefore, Iliana is less likely to carry the same prejudices. Although she is victim to stereotypes from the Black, White and Latino communities, Iliana does not appear to have any indignation toward any one group. Instead, as her argument with Marina indicates, she acknowledges both her Black skin and her Latina heritage because they are a part of who she is. This acceptance of both heritages places Iliana in a liminal, albeit uncomfortable space: “. . .she had yearned to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she be easily identified as belonging to either group” (190).

Aside from her inability to locate herself racially and emotionally, Iliana struggles with developing her own spirituality. This crisis stems as much from Papito’s strict parenting as it does from Aurelia’s silence about her own faith. At the beginning of the novel, Iliana hears her mother’s voice while she is at school. Initially, she dismisses the voice, claiming that it is demonic: “‘Get thee behind me. Satan,’ she had commanded the voice, relying, without conviction, on the exhortation she had been taught repelled evil spirits” (2). Although it appears that Iliana has turned away from her father’s faith due to her negligence in attending church, the beliefs and Scriptures are still ingrained in her. It is upon hearing the voice, then, that Iliana begins to feel guilty about not attending church: “Not only had she neglected waking early to catch the bus to the Seventh-Day Adventist church in town, she had also gone to the local bar and, for the first time ever, to the cinema, where Satan preyed on souls” (2). Ironically, it is the same voice—the voice of her mother—that draws her back to the family home. Once Iliana

realizes that the voice belongs to Aurelia, she is reminded of certain characteristics about her mother that reveal her own repression. Pérez writes,

Cowering beside her bed, Iliana recalled her mother's ears. Those ears, with holes pierced during a past Aurelia rarely spoke of, had both frightened and intrigued her. Raised in a religion which condemned as pagan the piercing of body parts, she had imagined that, were her mother's clogged holes pried open, she would transform into a sorceress dancing, not secretly on a Sabbath when she stayed home by feigning illness, but freely, unleashing impulses Papito's religion had suppressed. (3)

It is evident to Iliana that Aurelia's choice to practice Papito's faith is motivated by duty rather than by true conviction. Being away from home alerts Iliana to the fact that her mother is victim to the same repression as she and her siblings. Despite Aurelia's silence about her past and her faith, she still manages to pass on to Iliana aspects of her culture that are contrary to the strict tenets of the Adventist religion. She teaches her how to dance merengue on Sabbath morning while the rest of the family is at church. While in her dorm room on cold nights, it is Aurelia's voice that transports her to a warm Dominican Republic. Aside from revealing family troubles, the voice speaks to Iliana about her past, and affirms her Dominicaness and reassures her "of her own existence and [keeps] her rooted"(4). Moreover, unlike the rest of her siblings, Iliana becomes aware of her mother's supernatural powers even before she begins to utilize them. These powers, she surmises, "might somehow right the wrongs in each of her [siblings'] lives and conjure happiness in their futures"(197). Aurelia uses her powers to impart to Iliana a sense of identity that she herself is struggling to attain. Although she makes the decision to come to the United States to provide better opportunities for Iliana and her siblings, Aurelia cannot suppress the desire to share some aspects of her culture to her children. This need is inherent in immigrant

mothers who want to instill in their children their cultural values without compromising the latter's ability to adapt to American culture. To this end, the phenomenon of motherhood must be adapted into a transnational context and become "a form of agency that migrants use to traverse their new (and sometimes antiquated) geographies of power" (Pessar and Mahler qtd. in Sandoval and Hernández 44). In this case, Aurelia must circumnavigate the mechanism of power that has repressed both herself and her daughter (Papito's religion) in order to help Iliana navigate in her new surroundings and, ultimately, survive.

When Iliana returns to the family home, she is greeted by both rejection and acceptance. Upon arrival, her sister Marina answers the door, and then slams it in her face. Her mother, however, opens the door, invites Iliana in, and prepares a meal for her. This meal, as Kiss notes, is the Caribbean version of the Prodigal Son's fattened calf: "fried, sweet plantains and a stew of cow's feet, honeycomb tripe, garbanzos and carrots served over yucca and rice" (33). When Rebecca sees her younger sister, she greets her with disdain: "Some of the smartest people have never been to school. Don't think going entitles you to an attitude" (30). Papito refers to her with pride as their "'jucated daughter" (49), but then reprimands her for being "the one who said you'd stay, and you left as soon as you got the chance" (50). The mixed responses to Iliana's homecoming define the family home as a conflicted space. Though she returns home with the expectation of being embraced, Iliana quickly discovers that despite her efforts to get a decent education, remain a virgin and help the family, she cannot satisfy her family's expectations of her.

Soon after Iliana arrives, the family decides to attend service together at Papito's Adventist church. Once serving as a movie theater and "a dwelling place for Satan" (104), the church echoes the displacement of the characters in the novel. The carpets, "the color of

sacrificial blood . . . emitted a faint scent of tobacco which hinted at the pleasures of the forbidden”(104). Due to the Adventist disdain of religious images, there are no pictures or statues to cover the crumbling walls. Unlike the rest of the family, Iliana chooses to sit in the balcony where she would “discover which teenage children of which avidly religious parents had slumped low in their seats to make out in the dimly lit back rows” (104). These images of decay and debauchery in a holy place reflect Iliana’s negative attitude toward the church. It is not only noteworthy that Iliana sits separate from the rest of the family, but also that she pays special attention to the minister preaching. The sermon, entitled “The Virtues of Marriage,” criticizes women for tricking men into marrying and being attracted to them. This bothers Iliana and causes her to question the pastor’s words: “Why the hell doesn’t he talk about why women feel the need to do this? Iliana wondered. Why the fuck doesn’t he criticize men for falling in love with hair, lips and perky tits? And what place did this tirade have in church? What did any of it have to do with God?” (106). Her questioning of the message opens Iliana’s eyes to the hypocrisy of the members of the church, including some of her own siblings. Further adding to her distaste is the removal of her sister Marina from the sanctuary due to her outbursts: “Iliana saw their faces contort with hatred. It was as if any moment they would rise and fall upon her sister with stones they had waited all their lives to throw” (109). Concerned, she leaves the sanctuary to console Marina, who has decided to go home alone.

After the service is over, Iliana seeks the friends that she had before going away to college. These young people had become students at Adventist universities and had rejected her for choosing to attend a secular college. One of the friends, Esther, completely ignores Iliana despite their previous friendship and the former’s history of deviant behavior. Spurned by those she once trusted, Iliana is made aware of the fact that she is indisputably alone. Isolated due to

her race, her decision to go to college and now her choice to defend her sister, Iliana's sense of emotional displacement becomes almost unbearable. This spiritual / emotional crisis, however, does not prevent her from continuing to seek God. Discovering that Marina has attempted suicide a third time, Iliana adamantly prays for her sister's recovery:

Iliana's voice strained toward God. She prayed for her sister, her parents and herself.

With the last tenets of her faith, she persuaded herself that God really did exist and was actually listening to her words. She spoke to Him of all that she had been unwilling to admit even to herself . . . She spoke until her voice grew hoarse and her knees numbed against the living room's marble floors. She spoke until she forgot her father's presence and wore out her tongue speaking of what lurked in the recesses of her mind. When she finally opened her eyes, she recalled little of what she'd said. Yet, inexplicably, her soul had calmed. (129)

Disregarding the hypocrisy that she witnesses in the church, Iliana turns to God for help. What is significant about this spiritual encounter is the fact that the father is ignored and thereby replaced by God. Papito, the spiritual authority in the household up to this point, has served as Iliana's spiritual guide and moral compass for much of her life. However, his grief over Marina's suicide renders him spiritually bankrupt and helpless. Unable to pray himself, Iliana intervenes and intercedes for him. By taking the position of intercessor and revealing the intimate details of her life to God, Iliana is carving out her own faith, one that is not dependent upon her father. She feels peace because she is able to reveal her struggles in prayer on her own terms.

After Marina returns home from the hospital, she turns her attention even more upon Iliana. The older sister resents her younger sibling's independence. In her mind, Iliana's abilities to go out with friends and to go away to college are all masculine characteristics:

She was as self-seeking as a man and, like Vicente, had abandoned home when she'd been needed most. Since her return, she had rarely concerned herself with the problems of her siblings. 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. (277).

Marina's obsession with Iliana's gender results from her own unfulfilled desires and control over her life. Unlike her sister, Marina is subservient and chooses to stay at home to care for her parents. Repeatedly accosted by her male coworkers for sex, she is unable to achieve her goal of marrying a successful White or light-skinned Hispanic man. Her body and her race are stumbling blocks to marriage since, as a mulatto woman, she is "the ultimate victim of sexual abuse and subjugation by others and by circumstances she can never control" (Duke 26). Furthermore, her rape by a "flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger" (17) forces Marina to face the Black self that she wishes to suppress. This confrontation affirms her existence as a Black woman, and therefore pushes her past the borders of her sanity. To avenge her loss of power, Marina acts out in her madness what her Dominican femininity does not permit her to do as a sane person; having failed at taking her own life, she rapes Iliana twice as a means to take back the power and control she feels that she has lost. According to Sharon Lewis and Cathi Albertyn, a rapist takes away a woman's sense of autonomy; therefore, the victim seeks opportunities to regain that control as quickly as possible (26). Marina's madness justifies the act as one that is ordained by God: "His 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 do" (278). Having now been chosen by God, Marina receives the notoriety that she once sought as a young adult.

If proper femininity is to be constructed on the basis of obedience, passivity, and physical attractiveness, then masculinity must be associated with independence, authority, and power. Hence, Marina compares Iliana to her brothers; in this way, she transfers her hostility toward her brothers onto her sister. The double rape, then, is an attempt to not only regain a sense of power and control, but it is also the means by which Marina will punish her sister and the other men that have abused her (74). The first rape is to expose Iliana's hidden manhood by removing her invisible phallus, which, according to Sandín, "is principle of both creativity and power that Marina lacks and craves" (74). The second rape is motivated by Marina's sheer hatred of her sister: "Hatred was visible in Marina's eyes: raw, unadulterated hatred that confirmed those times Iliana had detected glimmers of it but had dismissed it, times when her sister had said, 'You're so beautiful, so smart, so cool.' Hatred that now conveyed: *You think you're so special, so goddamn smart and cute!*" (289). By destroying Iliana's feigned self-confidence, Marina hopes to expose her vulnerability and "emasculate" her. That this act is propelled by hate implies that the older sister is not completely devoid of her mental devices. Still, Aurelia attributes the attack on Iliana to Marina's madness, which again points to the impotence of the mother's power over violence.

After the rape, Iliana decides to leave the house and confide in her friend Ed. She does not find Ed and is therefore left alone with her thoughts. Forced to face the reality of her attack, she realizes that her sister's rage is not motivated by mental illness but by her desire to keep her away:

Each of her reasons for returning home was shadowed by the knowledge that her sister would have preferred for her to stay away and by the sudden realization that she had returned not so much to help as to be embraced . . . Having spent years plotting how to

leave only to discover, when she finally did, that she felt as displaced out in the world as in her parent's house, she had made the decision to return and to re-establish a connection with her family so that regardless of where she went thereafter, she would have comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her the courage to confront the prejudices she had encountered during eighteen months away. (312)

This passage reveals Iliana's main conflict in the novel—the desire to belong. Like her mother, she too seeks to be embraced and welcomed. This journey results in the crossing of various *geographies* – the church / religion, the university, the racial spectrum, and, ultimately, the family home—in the hope of finding total acceptance and harmony. Iliana's inability to successfully navigate / negotiate these spaces of conflict is a direct consequence of her parents' insistence upon not revealing to her aspects of her family's past. The obscurity surrounding her parents' history coupled with her father's abuse alienate her to the truths that ultimately have the power to set her free.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise when Iliana is slapped by her father for coming home too late. Instead of flinching from his blows, however, she stands still before her father and vows silently never to let him control her again: *"I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone. You will not make me be ashamed of it as my sister did. You will not make me recoil from it or renounce my life as I thought I would do. I will survive all this"*(313). Iliana's silent proclamation contrasts with Marina's proclamation as she is raped: "No flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger would claim her soul. No savage with beads dangling from his neck. She would survive all this. There was nothing else to lose. Nothing else to fear. . . Her body might be snatched, not her soul. And her body was merely dust. It did not consist of who she was"(17-18). Marina's thoughts as she is raped are laced with hatred. The way in which she addresses her

rapist reveals her own negrophobia, and therefore her own self-loathing. Contrary to Iliana, she is more concerned with her soul than with her physical body. In fact, she blames herself for the rape and seeks God's forgiveness for going to an astrologer and "not trusting [Him] to provide answers to her questions"(17). As penance for her deeds, she promises that she "would live to be His instrument and to point out evil where it appeared"(18). Marina never takes ownership of her body; instead, it becomes a tool for God to use. By submitting herself again to Papito's God, Marina is subjecting herself once again to a patriarchal system. Her guilt, shame, unfulfillment, and her inability to accept her blackness all contribute to Marina's self-destructive and violent behaviors. Though she survives physically, her self-hatred and utter helplessness cause her to relive the trauma of rape over and over again. In contrast, Iliana takes ownership of her body and refuses to accept her father's accusation that she is a whore. Unlike her sister, Iliana is able to "turn the other cheek" in spite of the violent acts committed against her. The young woman's silence, however, is not to be read as cowardice. By not responding with fear or violence to her father's abuse, Iliana is robbing Papito of his power over her. In this sense, she is stronger than both her sister and father whose frustrated desires cause them to resort to violence.

Sensing his daughter's anger and resentment, Papito attempts to talk candidly with his daughter. As her father repentantly explains his intent to shelter her and her siblings with his strict rules, Iliana realizes for the first time that she has had false expectations of him: "... Iliana had endowed him with powers no human could possibly possess. . . It was to this imaginary father that she had compared Papito upon her arrival to the United States. It was out of his failure to measure up that her resentment toward him had eventually been born" (319-320). It is this epiphany that enables Iliana to let go of her anger towards Papito and forgive him. Consequently, Kevane asserts that Iliana's forgiveness of her parents and her refusal to violently retaliate

against Marina allow her to create “a new geography of religion all her own” (99). This forgiveness, while it does not permit Iliana to stay at home, opens the door for both her healing and that of her parents: “Everything she had experienced; everything she continued to feel for those whose lives would be inextricably bound with hers; everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in the passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home” (321). Although Iliana decides that she can no longer live at home, she realizes that all of the problems in the family house are necessary for her growth in the outside world. She, unlike her sisters, cannot live in regret and unforgiveness for the tragedies that have happened to her. Instead, she must embrace both the pain and the joys of being in the home space so that she can eventually navigate the troubled waters of American society. Confronted with conflicting and unstable notions of home, Iliana must, as part of the healing process, reconcile and challenge societal concepts of identity to carve out and affirm her own existence. This process is aided by her own mother’s journey back “home” to her roots, and involves a return to and understanding of the past to develop what Gloria Anzaldúa has termed “new ways of being and acting”(2). These new ways of being are established on the basis of traditions, histories, and traumas once forgotten, for, as seen in the lives of Aurelia and Iliana, one must often sweep away the cobwebs of the past in order to survive in the present.

CONCLUSION —“HUNG UP BETWEEN TWO STICKS”: WHEN JUST BEING LATINO/A IS NOT ENOUGH

“I hate the paddy who’s trying to keep the black man down. But I’m beginning to hate the black man, too, ‘cause I can feel his pain and I don’t know that it oughtta be mine. Shit, man, Puerto Ricans got social problems, too. Why the fuck we gotta take on Negroes’, too?”

-- Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967:124)

“In the process of putting the book together, we discovered a whole series of people who were identified as being African American because they appeared—Black. There was no real attention to their [Latino] ethnicity even if they spoke Spanish; they served as bridges. Afro-Latinos function in two worlds: African [Black] and Latino.”

-- Miriam Jiménez Román on the process of editing *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (interview with losafrolatinos, March 2012)

As demonstrated in the Introduction to this study, U.S. Afro-Latinos have had the unique struggle of living on the margin of two worlds: the Latino and the African American spheres. Many have responded to this issue by integrating into Black American communities and self-identifying as African Americans. More recently, however, there has been a growing trend toward an acceptance of both a Black and a Latino heritage. Globalization and a growing Latino immigrant population are the catalysts for this movement. The incorporation of a Black Latino category on the 2000 U.S. Census has also prompted a reconceptualization of the term “Latino.” Jorge Gracia’s Familial-Historical View of Latino Identities offers a definition for the term that accounts for the diversity within the Latino community, while acknowledging the associations between cultural groupings. This revisionist concept, though it places Afro-Latinos within a broader category, also marks their singularity as a group. Notably, the objective of this study has not been to essentialize Afro-Latinos as a group; however, as illustrated in part by Gracia’s theory, the historical and social circumstances surrounding the identity formation of these individuals have made possible the development of certain common manifestations in literary discourses produced by Afro-Latino/a individuals.

F. Michael Higginbotham, in his political analysis *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-Racial America*, points out that since the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, many Americans have determined that the United States has entered the “post-racial” era, a period in which discrimination against minorities no longer exists (20). This myth of racial harmony is damaging to race relations in this country not only because it ignores the economic disparity that exists between Whites, Blacks and Latinos, but also because it does not allow for the open discussion of racial inequality among Americans. Additionally, it further complicates matters for Afro-Latinos, who are often victims of covert racism both in mainstream American society and in the Latino community. While this study presents a unique perspective on race relations in the United States and in Latin America, it also calls for a questioning of racial categories in both contexts. To this end, I have examined the meaning behind the term *Afro-Latino*, and have defined what I have determined to be literary manifestations of Afro-Latinity: language play, expressions of isolation associated with an inability to fit comfortably within a Black, Latino or Anglo-American context, and a preoccupation with conflicting notions of home and family. Moreover, I have examined these phenomena within novels and autobiographies written by Afro-Latino/a authors who acknowledge, seek to understand and embrace their African heritages.

Although the works studied differ greatly in their subject matters and historical contexts, they are united in their rejection of White supremacy. Junot Díaz’s use of language in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* indicates the potency of transnational exchange between the United States and the Dominican Republic and negates long-standing language hierarchies within American society. By choosing not to distinguish between Spanish, Spanglish and English, the author challenges the othering of the Spanish language. This style is an affront

to the perception that one cannot be Latino, Spanish-speaking and American. The addition of other marginalized discourses—nerd-speak, Black Vernacular English and Afro-Dominican cultural references—calls into question the validity of stereotypical perceptions of blackness and Dominicaness. Oscar’s affirmation of his Dominicaness despite his kinky hair and the narrator’s identification of Dominicans as niggers present alternative ways of being that contradict the idea that all Dominicans are White. In essence, *Oscar Wao* is a historical record that bridges distinct subaltern worlds (Black, Latino, nerd) and, as a consequence, playfully chastises the primacy of hegemonic historical discourses.

Piri Thomas’s and Evelio Grillo’s journeys toward self-acceptance as recorded in *Down These Mean Streets* and *Black Cuban, Black American* also indicate a denial of White supremacy. Their life stories epitomize the Afro-Latino/a’s struggle to find community during periods of high racial tension. The cultural and historical information presented in these autobiographies affirms the existence of an Afro-Latino community. In doing so, Thomas and Grillo’s work opposes the homogenization of Afro-Descendants. Furthermore, the authors’ triple consciousness—the experience of being concurrently aware of the need to assimilate to American culture, of the implications of their physical blackness and of the connection to Latin American roots—provide them with an unusual positioning that not only allows them to function as role models for other Afro-Latinos, but also to unite Black and Latino communities in the fight against racial discrimination. The latter function is especially important given that both groups have been and continue to be economically and socially disenfranchised in American society.

Loida Maritiza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* challenges patriarchal systems by placing them on equal footing with othered discourses. The presence of both Afro-Caribbean

Spirituality (represented by the mother) and Seventh-Day Adventism (represented by the father) in the novel underscores the diversity within the Latino community. In the novel, the father's religion creates an oppressive environment for the entire family. However, when the mother (Aurelia) decides to return to her religious roots, both religious systems are presented as possible solutions to the family's problems. By making the choice to go back to her mother's faith, Aurelia is not only able to exercise her own power, but she paves the way for her youngest daughter—Iliana—to carve out her own existence. Aurelia's religion also becomes a vehicle through which Iliana learns about her history. This knowledge strengthens the young woman's sense of self and enables her to confront the racism that she encounters at the university she attends. By the end of the novel, Pérez gives the implication that Iliana's triple consciousness, as well as the strength imparted to her by her parents, will enable her to carve out her own existence apart from the racist and sexist epithets that have emotionally scarred her.

Another aspect that is implicit in the works analyzed in this study is the presence of hope. While there are no resolutions by the ends of the novels and autobiographies, there is always the possibility of self-acceptance, growth and/or decolonization. *Oscar Wao* portrays colonialist discourses as a curse that can be reversed. *Down These Mean Streets* leaves the reader with the hope that Piri Thomas can lead a productive existence despite the racism that he encounters. *Black Cuban, Black American* is an example of one Black immigrant's successful integration into American society. Grillo's positioning as both Black American and Afro-Cuban allow him to be a voice for disenfranchised African Americans and Latinos. *Geographies of Home* illustrates how one's decision to embrace her roots produces a generation that can overcome the obstacles of racism and sexism. Finally, all works discussed in this dissertation expose readers to Afro-Latino culture and history.

In the novel *Invisible Man* by African American author Ralph Ellison, the nameless narrator concludes that despite being “a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids”(3), he is “invisible. . . simply because people refuse to see [him]” (3). Since the publication of the novel in 1952, African Americans have achieved a degree of visibility in music, literature, visual arts, sports, and politics. Nevertheless, there is still much work to do with regard to economic and social equality for African Americans. If the dream of social, economic and political equity for Blacks that Martin Luther King passionately bellowed from a podium in 1963 remains to be seen, what, then, can be said for the Afro-Latino? The concept of Afro-Latinity is relatively modern and there are numerous individuals who, either as a consequence of internalized negrophobia or integration into the African American community, do not ascribe to this term. In an interview with the blogger *losafrolatinos*, Miriam Jiménez Román, editor of *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, asserts that there are about four million Afro-Latinos living in the United States (Jiménez Román Interview, March 2012). However, the number of Afro-Latinos in American media does not reflect this presence. Although there are several actors, actresses and athletes of Afro-Latino descent in American television and film (i.e., Sammy Davis, Jr., Tatiana Ali and Reagan Gómez among others), their blackness is often more emphasized than their Latino heritages. Further complicating matters is the fact that in the United States, Latinity is only associated with certain phenotypes (e.g., olive or brown skin, dark hair and brown eyes).⁴⁵ For this reason, Afro-Latinos not only face discrimination within the Latino community, but they also must contend with the additional burden of proving their Latinity. In an article published in the online magazine “For Harriet,” writer Dash Harris discusses the issue of discrimination in the case of seven-year old Jakiyah McCoy, an Afro-Latina beauty-pageant

⁴⁵ This phenomenon is evident in the case of Colombian actress Sofia Vergara, who was asked to dye her naturally blonde hair a dark brown so that she would appear more Latina (Stanfield 231).

winner whose crown was revoked in September 2013 because the judges did not believe that she was Latina enough.⁴⁶ According to Harris, the main issue surrounding the matter is not whether or not McCoy represents Latina beauty, but rather “it is about the image that Latin Americans want to project and it has had and continues to be a Eurocentric, white-washed one; an image that applies to a very small minority of Latin Americans” (“She Represents Us,” 2013). McCoy’s case is a clear illustration of the need for greater exploration of Afro-Latino history and culture.

In the last five years, the Afro-Latino community has responded to the overall lack of Black Latinos in American media with the creation of social media projects and blogs such as *losafrolatinos.com*, *afrolatinoforum.org* and *Proyecto Afrolatin@*. The goal of these organizations is not only to educate the masses about Afro-Latinos around the world, but also to promote initiatives that combat discrimination against the communities they represent. Their work has been instrumental in igniting conversation about what it means to be both Black and Latino in American society, while challenging the heterogeneous nature of racial categories in general. By addressing issues unique to the Afro-Latino community, these blogger-activists are helping to create a name and space for a section of the American population that, for centuries, has existed in virtual anonymity.

⁴⁶ Jakiyah McCoy, winner of Little Miss Hispanic Delaware on August 31, 2013, was stripped of her title and crown because, according to the judges, her Latina heritage could not be proven. According to NBC Latino, “McCoy was born in Brooklyn, NY and her grandmother was born in La Vega, Dominican Republic. However, Latino Rebels spoke to María Pérez, president of Nuestras Raíces Delaware (the pageant sponsor). She said pageant regulations state participants need to be of 25 percent Latino heritage”(Puga, “Little Miss Hispanic Delaware stripped of her crown for not being ‘Latina enough,’” September 2013). A petition of four hundred supporters started in Brooklyn, NY stated that “McCoy won the Little Miss Hispanic Delaware pageant but the sponsoring organization, Nuestras Raíces Delaware, has blocked her win after an outcry from people claiming that, because she is Black, she is ‘not the best representative of Latin beauty.’ The title is now pending while the committee ‘investigates’ Jakiyah’s heritage. Meanwhile, none of the other competitors were subject to such an investigation”(Puga, “Little Miss Hispanic Delaware,” September 2013).

This study has made the case for the existence for Afro-Latino literary expression, but it has also underscored the importance of cooperation between the African American and Latino communities for mutual success. It has been proposed that the act of writing the Afro-Latino experience is an essential part of this process. Many Black Latino writers have self-identified as activists not only because they confront discrimination in their texts, but also because their work addresses issues such as immigration rights in the U.S. and human rights for Afro-Descendants around the world. The Afro-Puerto Rican writer Arturo Schomburg's essays⁴⁷ and collections of Afro-Latino and African American art and literature encouraged solidarity between Black Americans and Latinos, and led to the creation of one of the premier research centers for Black cultural studies (Oboler and Dzidzienyo 19). Other writers such as Jesús Colón, Yvette Modestin, and Piri Thomas have served as advocates for Blacks in their countries of origin, while promoting political and social agendas that protect the rights of Afro-Descendants here in the United States. These writers have provided scholars with valuable information about the history and culture of Blacks whose communities have, until recently, remained virtually unknown. Their impact both as writers and activists demonstrates that an awareness of the mechanisms that shape and define Afro-Latino identity can facilitate a more in-depth understanding of multicultural individuals in general. This knowledge can help social services and institutions to better assess the needs of these communities and to provide culturally appropriate assistance. Furthermore, it will encourage Afro-Latinos of subsequent generations to embrace the tensions and difficulties that have shaped and continue to shape their identities.

⁴⁷ Schomburg, Arturo. "The Negro Digs Up His Past." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997. 231-44. and "Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges, Address Delivered at the Teachers' Summer Class at the Cheney Institute, Pennsylvania, July 1913." *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*. Ed. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 67-69.

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