



## ***GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME: WHERE DOES THE MIRROR “LIE”?***

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### *Introduction*

There is no “typical experience” either for Dominicans living in this country or for those remaining in the Dominican Republic, just as there is none for Americans who have lived in the United States since their ancestors arrived on the *Mayflower*. We live our lives in myriad different ways. Therefore, when I set out to write *Geographies of Home*, I had no intention of writing a definite text of any sort. Instead, my intention was to write a narrative wherein I explore the lives of a particular family of specific living under specific circumstances. Any attempt to do otherwise would have resulted in stereotypes.<sup>2</sup>

The extract above was taken from an introduction to *Geographies of home* presented in the Penguin reader guide to the novel. It is a part of an interview in which Loida Maritza Pérez talks about her book. As life is full of unexplained events and people, besides being seen through the lens of superficial impressions, have their character formed by a plurality of experiences, it seems that Pérez wanted to transport this multitude of possibilities and limitations to her fictional work. This way, the author uses this web of possibilities to portray different sides of her characters and presents to the reader a depiction that cannot be defined under any stereotype.

*Geographies of home* tells the story of a large immigrant family from the Dominican Republic living in the United States, more specifically, in New York. Aurelia and Papito immigrate to the United States in search of a better life for their family of fourteen sons and daughters. Although the book does not describe the journey of all of them, the reader is able to have a varied depiction of their different and singular experiences. The narrator “approaches” the voices of some characters so we can have an idea of their point of view concerning events. Iliana, Marina, Rebecca, Aurelia and Papito are the ones from whom we have major insights. If we read and think that we know a certain character and can define him / her according to certain conceptions, as the narrative progresses, we see that we cannot rely on first impressions. Every story does not have two sides, but multiple sides. The novel is constructed in a way we have the characters’ perceptions of events, of themselves and of other characters. We can formulate a picture of the story and analyze it by putting all these pieces together. Probably, that is the way the narrative tries to show that we should not look at labels such as nationality, ethnicity and gender, because people are more than these superficial features.

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<sup>2</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 6.



Nevertheless, an interesting question can be raised: do people actually perceive only the exterior of others because of their own inefficiency to see beyond appearances or because we are guided by what other people think about us and do nothing to change this superficial view? In other words, do we produce a self-image or simply reproduce the image others expect us to have? What W. E. B. DuBois points out in his work “The souls of black folk” about the situation of Negroes in the beginning of the Twentieth century anticipates the issues of other ethnic groups in the United States:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, 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-image though the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.<sup>3</sup>

So, are the eyes of prejudice exclusive of others or are they embedded in our souls by our own passivity? This is the question this paper will try to answer by exploring the views of the characters in *Geographies of home* in what concerns their view of themselves and those around them and the ideas they have of their environment. Considering that the novel is not only concerned with problems involving displacement and immigration, the analysis will touch on issues concerning ethnicity, gender relations, family relations and psychological problems in order to have a comprehensive exploration of character’s constructions and their portrait of their internal and external “places”.

### *1. Geographies of color: white and the different shades of black*

The rampant “racial profiling” and waves of police brutality are directed against both African and Latino victims, with no color distinctions of this kind playing a role. For the fact is that, in many inner-city situations, there is no such difference, and it is not possible “tell them apart.” What the hegemonic, consumer version of Latino ethnicity obscures is that many Latinos are black, especially according to the codes operative in the United States. And what is more, while this version tends to racialize Latinos toward whiteness, much in tune with the racist baggage of Latin American and Caribbean cultures, on the streets and in the dominant social institutions, “brown” is close enough to black to be suspect.<sup>4</sup>

In his extract from the essay “Nueva York, diaspora city”, Juan Flores argues that as long as Americans see Latinos in a romanticized way, as a ‘consumer ethnicity’, they ignore the real problems involving this ethnicity inside American institutions in a daily basis. Flores continues by saying that “Today’s global conditions impel us beyond these tidy, nationally constricted views of

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<sup>3</sup> DUBOIS, W. E. B. The souls of black folk. Termo In: Rivkin, Julie e Ryan, Michael. (Eds.). *Literary theory: an anthology*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998, p.869.

<sup>4</sup> FLORES, Juan. Nueva York, diaspora city. Termo In: Sommer, Doris. *Bilingual games: some literary investigations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p.73.



cultural identity, which might well be referred to as ‘consumer ethnicities’” (FLORES, 2003, p.75). Cultural identity goes beyond pre-established models and invites us to think about the multiple possibilities of establishing one’s identification. Skin color, as an important marker for race, is of ultimate importance for us in order to understand problems concerning cultural identities.

Most of people’s conceptions are modeled through traditional views perpetuated throughout history. In the encounter between Europe and Africa during early imperialistic times, Africans were considered as an inferior race by Europeans. Later, when they were brought to America (the continent) to work as slaves, their inferiority was already internalized not only in the minds of the slavers but also in their own minds. Despite the evolvement of times and conditions concerning black people, this view concerning their inferiority seems to be far from extinction. Blackness is still a synonym of inferiority.

In the very beginning of *Geographies of home*, we are presented to the issue of race being used as an offensive means to affect Iliana, “The ghostly trace of ‘NIGGER’ on a message board hanging from Iliana’s door failed to assault her as it had the first time she returned to her room to find it” (PÉREZ, 2000, p.1). Why would students from a renowned university have this kind of attitude? And why was Iliana not offended by the term? We can only conjecture the answers.

First, we could interpret the gesture of the students as a sign of insecurity. When they see a student of a different ethnicity in the place that was long monopolized by their ethnicity, they feel threaten. They fear the lost of their place as they realize things are changing. So, this break in traditional order leads the students to a reaction that tries to imply that, although she is there, in the same place as they are, she is an alien, inferior to them. So, we could conclude that their fear overcomes their supposed belief related to the myth of race inferiority, as well as we can read their act both as conscious or unconscious – they are producing their own discourse or simply reproducing a past discourse.

The answer to the question concerning Iliana’s attitude lies in the knowledge she gained through her books as we can see in the passage, “[S]he had spent most of her time observing her family and immersing herself in books. As a result, her perception of what the world could offer had expanded, and she wanted more than her sisters had obtained” (PÉREZ, 2000, p.43). Moreover, the answer appears in her eagerness to question pre-modeled values and, especially, in her experience outside home and her wish to ignore the disruption of her dreams as we can see in the following passage:

For a year and a half she had lived in a town whose pristine appearance had deceived her into believing, because she wanted desperately to believe, that, having entered into the company of the elite, she would never



again suffer hunger or abuse. She had clung to this belief despite hearing the word “NIGGER” erupt from the lips of strangers; seeing swastikas scrawled on the walls of synagogues; and witnessing women, marching to “take back the night,” attacked for calling public attention to the town’s hidden violence. When classmates had presumed to know the inner workings of those of her race and class – inferring their inherent laziness, lack of motivation, welfare dependency and intellectual deficiency – she had stopped up her ears and gradually trained her eyes not to see.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in the same way people nurture wrong concepts about her, she nurtures misguided concepts about them. Iliana realizes that she can be “with” the elite but she is not one of them. Prejudice and abuse do not cease to exist. Maybe, her disillusion comes to show the reader that she expected the world with the elite to be different from her world at home, but she realizes that it is just an extension of the issues she was used to face. However, as readers are able to see the picture from a certain distance, they can say that actually, the issues in the familiar circle are a reflection of worldly myths. Prejudice and racial issues also permeate the relationship between her family members.

By the end of chapter 5, we witness Iliana and Marina arguing about the connotations of skin colors, white and black. Marina tells her sister that she “can do better” and by that she means that Iliana should not want a black man because “[t]hey are lazy as shit and undependable”. Iliana replies by saying that Marina has “been watching too much TV”. Iliana’s statement implies that she is aware that her sister’s point of view is influenced by “external” myths, i.e. the ideology long perpetuated by the “dominant” ethnic group. On the one hand, we are surprised by Marina’s reply “TV, my ass. Look at your brothers” (PÉREZ, 2000, p.38). Her statement could hint that her point of view derives from her observation of her family. On the other hand, Marina reinforces that she has “exterior” influences when she asks Iliana how many black people attend her school – revealing the idea that black people are uneducated – and says that white people have always treated her nicer than anyone else. She mentions teachers and bosses to illustrate her point and Iliana points out that they have only treated her right because they were paid for that. Here we can see prejudice from both sides: Iliana sees white people as the ones who always mistreat people from different races and Marina sees them as better than black people. She even defends herself as being “Hispanic, not black” when Iliana teases her about her skin color, showing that in her mind there is a difference between Hispanic and black people, the second being considered inferior.

What has influenced the conceptions of race of the two sisters? We know that Marina was raped by a black man and Iliana witnessed how the “majority” behaved in relation to the “minority” at school. But, can we only blame exterior features as the influence of the sisters’ points

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<sup>5</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p.71.



of view. The answer is negative. Their points of view were not constructed just in their contact to the outside world. At least, not the ones concerning Blacks' inferiority and Whites' superiority. Even Iliana, who seems to go against this way of thought, reveals its reproduction in the family when she analyses family old pictures and compares the sisters' features according to their "level of Blackness". Her lips are described as "wide as Marina's but the length of Beatriz's" and she considers herself ugly "despite chiseled cheeks and a nose her sisters envied as 'white'". Iliana also points out that Beatriz lowered Marina by saying that no one "would ever consider her attractive" because of "her baboon nose and nigger lips". The comparison among her sisters and even Gabriel's wife concerning skin color had already made Marina place blackness in a lower level in relation to whiteness. What intensified her prejudice was the fact that a black man raped her. Here is an example of how she reacted after the fact:

The longer she watched herself the more repulsed she became. Before, she had been able to manipulate her reflection so as to see only her pale skin shades lighter than any of her sisters' and only slightly darker than Gabriel's wife. That skin color had blinded her to her kinky, dirty-red hair, her sprawling nose, her wide, long lips. Now those features appeared magnificent, conveying to her eyes that she was not who she'd believed.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the conjunction of the ideas spread in / by her family and her traumatic experience made Marina despise black people and their features and, as a consequence, she does not like or accept her own body features.

Another character who acts according the belief that white people are superior to the black ones is Gabriel. Perhaps, in order to feel superior to the other members of his family, he marries a white woman. Laurie marries Gabriel because he was "the most sought-after male in the high school they attended", where she belonged to a minority and the "few white boys had preferred the Puerto Rican girls". However, as Iliana observes, Laurie feels superior to his family and avoids her husband, fact that Iliana thinks to be suitable to Gabriel due to his prejudice in relation to women's skin color.

But Gabriel had deserved it all, Iliana thought. Deserved it after years of craving a white woman and accusing black women of being the ugliest, loudest and most demanding -- like in the joke he loved to tell of a Latina cooing in the midst of sex, "Ay Papito! Ay Papito!"; a black woman shouting, "Give it to me, motherfucker! Give it to me now!" and a white woman whispering some nonsense.<sup>7</sup>

Prejudice unites and separates Gabriel and Laurie. Unites because, in one way or another, they need each other to feel superior in a certain manner, and separate because Laurie, feeling superior, does not feel attached to him or his family. So, Gabriel is the villain and the victim of his own prejudice. As he acts to reproduce it, he suffers its consequences.

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<sup>6</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p.106.



## 2. *Geographies of America: a reflection on material and imaginary places*

Whatever the historical accuracy of Yehoshua's thesis [about Jewish Diaspora], it does remind us of certain hazardous syndromes of the exiled stance: that is posture, if maintained too long, allows people to conceive of themselves as perpetually Other, and therefore unimplicated in the mundane, compromised, conflict-ridden locality that they inhabit; it allows them to imagine the sources and causes of predicaments as located outside, in a hostile or oppressive environment, rather than within.<sup>8</sup>

Eva Hoffman's point of view in her essay "The new nomads", stated in the extract above, serves to analyze and justify Iliana's behavior when she decides to come back home. We know that she goes to university to "escape her parents' watchful eyes" but she finds out that "the sky would remain the same threatening shade". She feels invisible and needs to go home to feel her own existence. Iliana expects home to be the safe place despite all of her family's problems. Instead, by the end of the book she finds the courage to face her reflection in the mirror and has the greatest realization of the entire story: she finds out the home is not the material space but the set of memories and experiences she cannot leave behind. So, against the odds, home comes out as a subjective space, a presence in the mind.

Along with the mistaken view of the split between superior and inferior race, the idea of home as a physical space is another myth constructed in the minds of so many immigrants. By the beginning of the novel, when Iliana is still at school, feeling displaced, readers can note that she associates her feelings to the places. When the attic room of the university offers no warmth, she transports herself in imagination to the eternal summer of the Dominican Republic. It's easier to the human mind to wish for the environment where we are not in. Otherwise, why do people, in various occasions, immigrate in the search of a better life, to escape poor conditions, and end up longing for the place they came from? We are guided by the beliefs we produce and reproduce; we become subjects and objects of our own web of ideas.

Immigrants and people in general search for the fulfillment of their idealizations. For immigrants, it is the conquering of the imagined better life in the host country. In *Geographies of home*, we can see that Rebecca is highly influenced by the idealized America. Unfortunately, She has her dreams and expectations fallen apart when she confronts reality. In the following passage, we have a sample of her disappointment, which can be extended to another members of her family and many other immigrants in the United States.

She remembered how, at the age of twenty-one, she had begged her parents for permission to move to the United States. She had honestly believed that she would be able to pick gold off the streets and send for her parents so they might live as grandly as those who returned to the Dominican Republic claimed was possible.

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<sup>8</sup> HOFFMAN, Eva. The new nomads. Termo In: Aciman, André. *Letters of transit: reflections on exile, identity, language and loss*. New York: The New Press, 1999, p.55.



Only after her arrival had she realized that those who moved to the States lived as miserably as most in her own country. One of the few advantages of emigrating was escaping riots and military raids, but even this was overshadowed by the fear of deportation.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of her disappointment, she manages to bring all her family to the United States. Moreover, she marries Pasi3n driven by the “infinite possibilities of wealth” because he was an American citizen and, instead, she suffers constantly because of his abuses and the poor conditions she lives in with her children. However, she continues with him for a long period and hides the truth for some time telling lies about her house and the way he treats her. Only after an occasion in which he beats her and tells her terrible things, she faces herself in the mirror and realizes what she has become, is that she finds the strength to leave him. As Iliana, by the end of the novel, Rebecca sees in her reflection not her surface, but her inner self. Against their common belief, the change does not come from the exterior, but from the interior.

The environment plays a minor part in comparison to the internal feelings. So, why do immigrants insist on staying in the host(ile) country? Can we blame the family for buying the American dream? How could they anticipate what they would be through in the foreign land? And why, despite the disappointment offered by the new life in the U.S. do they continue there? Aurelia’s point of view shows us that she and her husband ignore their own wish to go back to the Dominican Republic to stay with their children in America, despite the recognition of the erroneous view of the American dream.

So often Aurelia and Papito had considered returning to the Dominican Republic but had remained in the United States to be near to their married children and because their youngest, remembering little of their birthland, considered it a backward, poverty-ridden place. Now, she wondered if by emigrating they had unwittingly caused their children to yearn for a wealth generally portrayed as easily accessible to anyone in the States.<sup>10</sup>

Although she recognizes their mistake of letting their children, especially Tico, have a mistaken conception of the Dominican Republic and the United States, she and her husband are already accommodated and do little or nothing to change conceptions. It is certain that they cannot be blamed for buying the American dream because they could not have anticipated their family’s misfortunes as Aurelia states that “[t]here had been too many circumstances they were unable to control”.

Nevertheless, it is debatable the fact that they accommodate. As Elizabeth Janeway affirms in her book *Man’s world, woman’s place: a study in social mythology*, “Where reality offers not hope, the world of myth is called in” (JANEWAY, 1971, p.51). Their resignation contributes to the

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<sup>9</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p.59.

<sup>10</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p.22.



propagation of the American dream because they do nothing to show that it is a fantasy, instead, they adapt to the lie and turn their backs to some of its consequences as, for instance, Marina's attacks, when they refuse to treat her in an institution. It seems that Marina's "madness" will become more real if they openly recognize it.

Although it is easier to the readers to judge the characters' attitudes, we cannot deny that in our own lives we tend to seek for the easiest way out. If their life in America is bad, maybe it is easier to adapt to that kind of life than perform a change and go back to the Dominican Republic. Throughout history, we can observe that the attempts to expose the flaws of highly accepted ideas were very difficult. Changes are usually seen with suspicion, especially the changes concerning traditional ideas. According to Elizabeth Janeway:

To say that it is necessary for human beings to accept change is true enough, but it is only the beginning. How does acceptance take place? It doesn't happen automatically. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but sometimes she turns out to be sterile. Acceptance of change involves a psychological process of recognition and placement and rearrangement of all that we construct upon the stimuli that reach us from the outer or the inner world. Individually, this is just what goes on during psychoanalysis, as the patient shifts his structure of belief and network of symbolization. His own desire for change can do great deal to speed up the process, to the extent that it is a real desire and not simply a reaction to exterior pressure. Even so, there is always work to be done before an adjusted system of relationships feels so natural and habitual that we are free to think past it without being distracted by its novelty.<sup>11</sup>

So, on the one hand, the immigrants of the novel cannot be blamed for their accommodation because the rupture to already internalized concepts is a demanding process. On the other hand, the fact that the "material" America does not correspond to the "imaginary" America also cannot be confronted by the characters because they contribute to propagate this idealization.

### *Conclusion*

Like her mother's and father's too, her soul had transformed into a complex and resilient thing able to accommodate the best and the worst. Everything she had experienced; everything she continued to feel for those lives would be inextricably bound with hers; everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home.<sup>12</sup>

In *Geographies of home*, no concept is definitive. In the search for the meaning of home, readers are guided through different paths. We do not have a single geography of home, as well as we do not have home as a geographical place. Iliana's conclusion in the last paragraph of the book presented above represent the plurality of her experience, loaded with good and bad things. The

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<sup>11</sup> JANEWAY, Elizabeth. *Man's world, woman's place: a study in social mythology*. New York: William Morrow, 1971, p.139.

<sup>12</sup> PÉREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of home: a novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, p.321.



knowledge she acquires through her experiences leads her to accept both positive and negative experiences as part of who she is, without prejudice or disdain against none of these sides.

The influences in one's character and actions are not exclusively internal or external, but the mixture of both aspects: social interaction inside and outside their family. The characters reinforce the idea that we can't blame majorities for spreading inferiority ideas among minorities when these minorities passively accept and reproduce these ideas. In the same way, we cannot point our finger to minorities accusing them of being passive without evaluating the circumstances of their lives. No one is simply a villain or a victim. We are all inserted in a system of values, which is pushed to be internalized. The system produces and reproduces these values in a fluid manner.

Prejudice is not located in the image reflected in the mirror of another's eyes, it is present in the internal reflection of one's soul. Besides, we are the ones who look to our image and have the capacity to change it. Therefore, passivity is not a mandatory state of being, it is a choice that is difficult but not impossible to escape.

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