Narrative (Re)Mappings of the Dominican-American Immigrant Experience:

Reading Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and

Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana* (2019)

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A Thesis

submitted to the

Department of English Literature

and Culture, School of English,

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts in ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES

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Thessaloniki

March 2021
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ABSTRACT

The idea of the American Dream has been fundamental to the conception of the American society. It has attracted millions of immigrants from all over the world through its promise of prosperity to any individual who exhibits a strong work ethic, irrespective of their class, race, or place of origin. This study examines the relationship between space, identity and access to or exclusion from the American Dream as a central idea in two Dominican-American novels: Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana* (2019). The Latina female subjectivity in the two novels is explored within an intersectional framework, while taking into account postcolonial and decolonial concepts, as well as Doreen Massey’s conceptualization of space as a product of relations “imbued with power.” Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of “in-betweenness” is used in the analysis of Alvarez’s novel, and Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the “outsider-within” is employed in the analysis of Cruz’s novel. This thesis explores how constructions of gender, class, and race identities in the land of origin are inextricably intertwined with the immigrant experience, as they determine the reasons that lead to the characters’ migration and the conditions under which they emigrate. This thesis examines how gender, class, and race shape the way the characters navigate space, both in the country of origin and in the country of arrival, and how identity determines the female protagonists’ access to or exclusion from different spaces. By examining the spatial experience of migration and the ways it is conditioned by gender, class and race inequalities, in the public and the private/domestic sphere, the limitations of the idea of the American Dream are unveiled. This research argues that in Alvarez’s and Cruz’s literary representations of the Latina Caribbean immigrant experience in the U.S., spatial inclusion in the first novel, and spatial exclusion in the second novel, respectively suggest access to or exclusion from the American Dream. Thus, the immigrant experience is far from uniform, even among people of the same gender coming from the same country.
KEYWORDS: Latina Caribbean, immigration, American Dream, space, access, exclusion, identity, gender, class, race, intersectionality, “in-betweenness,” “outsider-within,” “‘world’-traveling.”
“A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers... —from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat.”
— Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power” (1977)

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
—Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” (1883)

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1 Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus” is engraved on a tablet within the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty stands (“Statue of Liberty National Monument: Emma Lazarus’ Famous Poem”).
INTRODUCTION

The relationship between space and identity is a central idea in the two Dominican-American novels studied in this thesis: Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana* (2019). Both texts focus on the female immigrant experience and how it intersects with class and race, as they examine identity and power dynamics in different spatial contexts. Both novels are coming-of-age immigrant narratives about girls who emigrate from the Dominican Republic to the U.S., and specifically to New York City in the 1960s, but aside from this similarity the two novels’ protagonists could not have been more different. Socioeconomic inequality in the Dominican Republic creates such a chasm between the white urban upper crust Garcías, and the mixed-race rural working-class Ana Canción, that it inevitably leads to completely disparate lived experiences for the female protagonists of these two novels, both in the country of origin and the country of arrival. Class and race intersect in complex ways and determine decisively the experience of immigration and the spaces that the girls in both novels have access to in the U.S., to such an extent that it is almost as if they navigate two different countries. Class determines their means of entry, especially considering the fact that the Garcías arrive in the U.S. as legal political exiles, whereas Ana in *Dominicana* is an undocumented economic immigrant in search of a better life. Class and race determine the reasons and conditions under which the female characters emigrate from their homeland; they shape their experience of private/domestic spaces versus public spaces; and they also condition their means of navigating urban space in the U.S.

Both novels can be read as contemporary Dominican-American meditations on the American Dream, or what the U.S. as the land of freedom and opportunity represents for the female characters, and what it actually offers. Alvarez’s novel presents its characters as affluent members of the Dominican elite, who arrive in the U.S. as a family of six in 1960,
under CIA protection in order to escape Trujillo’s regime. The Garcías initially struggle to adjust to the American society, where they are no longer perceived as prominent members of the elite. However, soon the father regains some of his old status as a successful doctor in New York City, and the family does have access to the American Dream, in spite of facing discrimination and experiencing a sense of “in-betweenness.” By contrast, Cruz foregrounds the female experience of the socioeconomically marginalized Ana Canción, a fifteen-year-old mixed-race working-class schoolgirl, whose parents marry her off to a man more than twice her age, in order to be able to immigrate in search of a better life. Ana’s lived experience is more representative of the vast majority of the Dominicans, who immigrate to the U.S. in order to escape poverty, but never really seem to have access to the American Dream of material prosperity.

Part of the argument of this thesis is that the immigrant experience is far from uniform, even among people of the same gender coming from the same country, given that the Garcías have access to privileged spaces, whereas Ana is practically excluded from them. Thus, a space-focused analysis of how the characters navigate different spatial contexts, depending on their identity, can help shed light on the disparities created by severe inequality even within the Dominican-American community. In Latin America, inequality is a central issue rooted in the region’s colonial history that has created social stratification. Benedict Anderson argued that nationality, nation-ness and nationalism are “cultural artefacts” (4), and that the nation is an “imagined community,” because, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (6, 7). Carlota Caulfield and Darién J. Davis emphasize that the Latino community, “like any other group is, to borrow from Benedict Anderson, an imagined community,” one imagined across time and space, “often fragmented regionally, economically, racially, and socially” (4). In addition, according to Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert
there are "tensions stemming from profound class and race differences," between women in
the Caribbean region that have resulted in the emergence of different "women’s movements, 
since feminist goals have often meant very different things to women of different races and 
classes" (9). Therefore, the contradictory history of Caribbean feminism reveals "the 
conflicting realities of Caribbean women" (9). Reading these two novels that foreground the 
Dominican-American female immigrant experience allows us to observe that they represent 
two completely different migrant narratives and standpoints that diverge due to the chasm 
created by socioeconomic stratification and inequality, which are remnants of the legacy of 
colonialism. The inequality experienced in the country of origin, ultimately follows the 
protagonists to the country of arrival, in spite of the fact that the U.S. prides itself to be the 
land of opportunity, where supposedly anyone can live the American Dream. Through the 

lens of an intersectional framework, I examine the way the characters navigate space. Given 
the heterogeneity of the Latina/o/x community and identity, in terms of race and class, the 
way the characters navigate space differs and suggests access to or exclusion from the 
American Dream.

The aim of this thesis is to argue that the Garcías’ access to prestigious spaces 
suggests access to the American Dream, due to their preexisting upper-class privilege and 
white European descent. Despite the discrimination they initially face, and their sense of “in-
betweenness,” the Garcías eventually reestablish prosperity, and attain freedom and 
opportunity in the U.S. On the other hand, I argue that Ana Canción’s spatial confinement 
and exclusion suggest exclusion from the American Dream of upward social mobility, due to 
obstacles resulting from intersecting forms of gender, class and race oppression. As a mixed-
race working-class girl, Ana is an outsider marginalized both in the Dominican Republic, and 
subsequently in the U.S., as an undocumented immigrant and underage bride. Even though 
Ana performs acts of resistance, and renews her hope, her exclusion is never resolved.
Historical Context: Dominican-American Migration and Its Literature

This thesis can be situated within a growing interest in literary works by Dominican-American writers, whose voices come to consolidate the considerable impact that writers of Latina/o and Caribbean descent have had and are still having on revisions of the immigrant experience in the USA. In Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States, William Luis states that Dominicans are the newest members of a Caribbean population living in the U.S., as they began to immigrate after “the end of the Trujillo dictatorship in 1961 and the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965” (xii). Luis studies Latino Caribbean writers as part of “the vanguard of a literary movement that has opened up a new field in literary history and criticism” (ix). This movement is “both Hispanic and North American in character,” and it is “helping to bring the two cultural groups and their literature together” (ix). The body of literature produced by Latino Caribbean writers “expresses the aspirations, disillusion, and sense of acceptance and rejection felt by Puerto Rican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Dominican Americans” (ix). The proliferation of Latina/o and Latina/o Caribbean literature written in the U.S. has profited from two main factors during the second half of the twentieth century. Political events in the U.S. during the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights movement and organizations such as the NAACP drew attention to the plight of Blacks and Latinos in the U.S. (ix). In addition, the worldwide acclaim of works written by writers of the “so-called Boom of Latin American literature” during the 1960s,² prompted North Americans who read Latin American writers in translation to uncover works written in English by U.S. Latina/o writers (x).

In The Dominican Americans, Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández point out that New York City has received the greatest influx of Dominican immigrants from any

² The most renowned exponents of the Latin American Boom are Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez (Nobel Prize 1982), who developed the literary genre of magical realism in his internationally celebrated novel One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967).
other place in the U.S. (xix, xx), and that the U.S.-Dominican relations started as early as in the mid-1800s (xx). Prior to the American cultural influence and political interventionism, the island’s history was marked by its colonial past. The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, which was home to “a thriving Taíno society” until in 1492 Christopher Columbus and his crew initiated the conquest and colonization of the island (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1). The Spaniards established on the island the first Spanish settlement of the Americas and after “a turbulent period of violence and depredation” the native population was decimated (2). The Spanish settlers sought to supply “slave labor,” through the importation of captive African slaves (3). Spain was increasingly losing control and relinquished jurisdiction over the entire island to France in 1795 (4). Meanwhile, on the western side of the island, slaves rebelled against their French colonial masters, leading eventually to “the black-ruled Republic of Haiti” proclaimed in 1804 (4). Tensions arose between the western part of the newly liberated Haiti, and the eastern part of the island. In 1844, the Dominican Republic was proclaimed as a sovereign nation, independent from Haitian rule (4). However, because of “the self-interest of its political elite,” the Dominican Republic suffered “the annexation of its territory to the colonial domains of the Spanish Crown in 1861, only seventeen years after the nation came into being” (5). This led to the War of Restoration in 1865 and political unrest (5). The history of colonialism is important, because even though both novels take place in a twentieth-century postcolonial context, the legacy of colonialism determines the socioeconomic positioning of the female protagonists, both on the island and in the U.S. as immigrants.

Torres-Saillant and Hernández assert that the takeover of Dominican customs in 1905 by the U.S. administration and the U.S. military occupation of the country between 1916 and 1924, clearly showed “the United States as the small country’s overlord” (6). The corrupt tyrannical dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 to 1961,
benefitted greatly from the U.S. presence in the country” (6). Trujillo’s assassination in 1961 marked a turning point in Dominican history (6). When Trujillo was eventually succeeded by the equally corrupt Joaquín Balaguer, for “the first time in history, Dominican society experienced a massive and contiguous exodus of people from the working-class, poor, and peasant sectors of the population” (6, 7). It is important to note that in Alvarez’s novel the García family immigrates to the U.S. in 1960, only a year before Trujillo’s assassination, because Carlos García, the father, conspires with a secret CIA agent in a failed attempt to assassinate the dictator. In Cruz’s novel, Ana emigrates in 1965, only three months before the occupation of the country by U.S. troops. These events are interwoven in the respective plots of the two novels revealing a history of U.S. interventions in the country’s affairs.

According to Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez, Alvarez is “the first voice in Dominican-American writing” (105), and was “the only well-known author of Dominican heritage writing in English” in the early 1990s (101). As the twenty-first century was ushered in, a new generation of Dominican-American novelists burst onto the pages of U.S. Latino literature, which includes Junot Díaz, Loida Maritza Pérez, Nelly Rosario, and Angie Cruz (101). These novelists “depict the lives of Dominicans who come to the US for the fabled American dream and economic betterment but instead must raise their children in tenements and unsafe urban areas” (105). The experience of immigration to the U.S. for reasons of “drastic economic need” permeates the writings of this new generation (109). These writers construct vibrant portraits of working-class Dominican immigrants, and their stories portray “the problematics of inner-city life, dead-end jobs and the dream of making dollars” (109). Thus, the works of the writers of the new generation, which includes Cruz, suggest that for many Dominican immigrants the American Dream is practically out of reach.
Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the Latina Caribbean immigrant experience and how it is conditioned by class and race is explored within an intersectional framework, while taking into account postcolonial and decolonial concepts, as well as contemporary spatial theory. This thesis aims to present a spatial examination of the Dominican-American immigrant experience, by shedding light on how the female protagonists of the two novels navigate space differently, both in the Dominican Republic, and most importantly in the U.S. Public and private spaces are examined, and an emphasis is placed on the ways spatial inclusion or exclusion respectively suggest access to or exclusion from the American Dream.

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989, in order to address intersecting systems of oppression and the resulting forms of discrimination experienced by Black women in the U.S. In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw argues that focusing on “the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination” (140). In “Mapping the Margins” (1991), Crenshaw asserts that immigrant women of color are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence, due to converging “systems of race, gender, and class domination” (1246, 1247-1248). Crenshaw’s approach has influenced my reading of both novels, and has been fundamental in contextualizing Ana’s experience as an undocumented immigrant and a victim of gender-based violence in Cruz’s novel.

Patricia Hill Collins introduced the concept of the “outsider-within” in 1986 and further developed intersectionality in Black Feminist Thought (1990). The concept of the “outsider-within” describes the social location of Black female domestic workers within white spaces, where they “would remain outsiders,” because they were “economically exploited workers” (11). In the chapter I examine Cruz’s novel Dominicana, I employ the
concept of the “outsider-within” in a broader sense in order to examine Ana’s social location and lived experience. Ana has an “outsider” status in the stratified society of the Dominican Republic, as a mixed-race rural working-class girl who inhabits a marginal position, and then she functions as an “outsider-within” in the U.S., as an undocumented immigrant. Even though Ana resists her exclusion she remains an “outsider,” because her dream of upward social mobility is unfulfilled, due to all the obstacles resulting from intersecting forms of gender, class, and race oppression.

In “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception” (1987), María Lugones, a decolonial feminist philosopher, developed the concept of “‘world’-travelling.” Lugones proposes that as “outsiders to the mainstream, women of color in the U.S.” necessarily acquire flexibility, which allows them to practice what she calls “‘world’-travelling” (3). “‘World’-travelling” is the traveling across “worlds” (3), or the experience of shifting from the mainstream construction of life, where women of color are constructed as outsiders, to other constructions of life, where they are “more or less ‘at home’” (3). It refers to the flexibility required in navigating mainstream spaces as an outsider. I employ this concept in the final part of Cruz’s novel in order to contextualize Ana’s navigation of New York City, as an outsider in a mainstream space, which I interpret as an act of resistance to her exclusion.

In The Location of Culture (1994), Homi K. Bhabha discusses the postcolonial concepts of “in-betweennis” and hybridity, as a feature of every culture. Bhabha proposes “to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences,” or what he calls the “in-between spaces” that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity” (1). I employ the notion of “in-betweennis” in my reading of Alvarez’s novel, but I also take into
account the criticisms regarding hybridity’s limitations. The Garcías’ hybridization begins before immigrating, and becomes even more evident as their identity shifts from Dominican to Dominican-American. I argue that Yolanda García’s career as a Latina writer who writes in English is the greatest expression of her “in-betweenness,” which leads her to live her own American Dream.

Doreen Massey’s work on spatial theory is also important to this project. In “Concepts of Space and Power in Theory and in Political Practice” (2009), Massey proposes a conceptualization of space as a product of relations “imbued with power” (18, 19). I read space and its negotiation in both novels as a structuring metaphor that suggests the characters’ access to or exclusion from the American Dream due to their gender, class and race. The Garcías are at first racialized in the U.S. because of their Spanish language, but their white upper-class privilege gives them access to prestigious spaces that suggest access to the American Dream. In contrast, Ana is at first confined in a small apartment because of gender and class oppression, and later on, when she navigates public space, she faces racism and the fear of deportation. Ana’s spatial confinement and exclusion suggest exclusion from the American Dream.

Kathryn Hume’s study American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction since 1960 (2000) examines novels that focus on “the slippage between America’s promises—equality, justice, prosperity—and the actuality of encounters between newcomers and the culture they enter” (10). Hume asserts that prosperity for anyone willing to work hard is a crucial component of the American Dream, as well as the hope to enjoy a society where class barriers are permeable (3). The core values of the Dream are fairness, material comfort, and freedom (4). Hume’s description of the basic elements of the American Dream is central to

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3 Hybridity discourse has been criticized for ignoring issues of class and race by Amar Acheraïou (121). Sten Pultz Moslund points out that hybridity “has been subject to a lot of criticism,” as it is “accused of elitism” (12). In order to account for the differences between the protagonists of the two novels, I employ an intersectional framework that prioritizes issues of class and race, and contextualizes the Garcías’ privileged position.
my reading of both novels, as I examine what elements of prosperity, freedom and opportunity for upward social mobility the characters enjoy or are unable to attain.

Luis Ricardo Fraga et al.’s research in *Latino Lives in America: Making It Home* (2010) examines what “living the dream” means to Latinos (29). Latinos “share the same vision as other working-class Americans of what it means to be successful and satisfied in life,” given that their focus is primarily on “material success and economic opportunities and not on political freedoms or the more abstract ideas identified with those in the middle class” (51). Some of the most important components of the American Dream for Latinos are: financial security (33), being able to move out of the “barrios” (34), homeownership, and quality education (35). Fraga et al.’s research has informed my reading of the characters’ understanding of the American Dream in both novels, as I examine what components of the Dream they have access to, and what they pursue. In Alvarez’s novel, for the Garcías as members of the upper-class who already enjoy prosperity, America is first about political freedom, and then about opportunity and professional success in order to reestablish their prosperity. In Cruz’s novel, for Ana as a working-class character, the Dream is first about escaping poverty and hoping for prosperity and upward mobility, but then it becomes also about the desire for education, personal freedom, and opportunity.

The multifaceted issues of the female Dominican-American immigrant experience as it is conditioned by socioeconomic class and race are explored in the next chapters. More specifically, the first chapter delves into the white upper-class female Dominican-American immigrant experience as it is depicted in Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Alvarez illustrates how the García girls inhabit a metaphorical space of “in-betweenness,” while having access to privileged spaces that suggest access to the American Dream, which entails prosperity, freedom and opportunity. The second chapter focuses on the experience of exclusion as it is lived by Ana’s character, a socioeconomic marginalized outsider. In
Dominicana, Cruz foregrounds the mixed-race rural working-class experience, and she challenges the mythologies surrounding the idea of the American Dream of prosperity and upward social mobility, which is the primary motive that drives most Dominicans to emigrate from their homeland to the land of opportunity.
CHAPTER ONE

“In-betweenness” and the American Dream in

Julia Alvarez’s How the García Girls Lost Their Accents

The García Girls⁴ is a novel “with a strong autobiographical base,” as Alvarez herself has admitted (qtd. in Cantiello 103). The novel tells the story of how the four García sisters, Carla, Sandra/Sandi, Yolanda/Yoyo/Yo, and Sofía/Fifi, as well as their parents Carlos and Laura flee the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo regime in 1960, and relocate in New York City as legal political exiles. The story explores the upper-class female Dominican-American immigrant experience. The narrative is written in a reverse chronological order, because Alvarez “wanted the reader to be thinking like an immigrant, forever going back” (qtd. in Ciocia 131). It is organized in three parts, each one consisting of five chapters. The first part takes place from 1989 to 1972, the second part from 1970 to 1960, and the third part, which is chronologically the first one, takes place from 1960 to 1956. Thus, the novel plays with time, which is reversed and shaped in a way that simulates the immigrants’ act of “looking back to understand their present,” as William Luis points out (“A Search for Identity” 839), but also perhaps in order to suggest time’s unreliability, and its correlation with the shortcomings and subjectivity of memory.

It is not surprising then, that most critics have focused primarily on the aspect of time and memory due to the novel’s chronologically reversed order. However, the novel’s spatiality is an aspect that has been mostly ignored, even though space plays a central role in postcolonial novels and theory. Space and its connection to power and identity, is a structural element which is particularly evident in the novel, even before the Garcías immigrate to the U.S. Alvarez employs space as a dimension that reveals social stratification and inequality rooted in a colonial past, but still very much present in the Dominican Republic. The

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remnants of colonialism can be construed through an analysis of the power imbalance as it is depicted in the negotiations of space the Garcías undertake within the family compound in the Dominican Republic. The importance of space pervades the story, as the girls go back and forth between the States and the Dominican Republic, two spaces that define different positions and identities for them, and ultimately their “in-betweenness.” Moreover, the characters navigate both private and public spaces, and interact in diverse ways according to where they stand in terms of power and identity. Thus, space emerges as the dimension that reveals unspoken truths regarding gender, race and class. Critics Jennifer Bess and Stefania Ciocia have focused on the girls’ trauma of exile, and the difficulties in adjusting to life in the U.S., mostly overlooking the fact that Alvarez also gives ample evidence that in spite of the difficulties, the girls also have access to spaces that suggest access to the American Dream.

This chapter explores the Garcías shifting identities in different spatial contexts, and their access to spaces that indicate access to the American Dream, in spite of their “in-betweenness.” Space is a dimension that has an enormous impact on the protagonists’ identities and the power they are able to exercise. The novel illustrates how the Garcías inhabit a metaphorical space of “in-betweenness,” given that they are transformed from powerful members of the Dominican elite as heirs of the Spanish Conquistadores, to political exiles in the U.S., and then to Dominican-American citizens. The first subsection of this chapter examines space, identity and power in the final chapters of the García Girls that take place in the Dominican Republic between 1956 and 1960. In this subsection, I investigate the spatial symbol of the García de la Torre family compound, the Garcías’ powerful socioeconomic position, who they are before becoming political exiles, how they interact with the people of the lower classes, the girls’ early access to American culture, and the reasons and conditions under which they emigrate. The second subsection explores the part of the narrative that illustrates how the Garcías navigate space in the U.S., how they face
discrimination as newcomers, as well as how they eventually adjust and become U.S.
citizens. I examine how the Garcías have access to privileged spaces, which suggest a high
standard of living and that unlike working-class immigrants they do have access to the
American Dream due to their class and race. The third subsection concludes that in spite of
the fact that Yolanda and her sisters feel at times alienated both in the U.S. and in the
Dominican Republic because of their “in-betweenness,” they still live their version of the
American Dream, as they have access to prosperity, freedom, and opportunity. I also argue
that Yolanda’s career as a Latina writer who writes in English is the greatest expression of
her “in-betweenness,” which leads her to live her own American Dream.

1.1 From Heirs of the Conquistadores to Political Exiles: Space and Power in the García
de la Torre Family Compound

The García de la Torre family compound in Santo Domingo is a central spatial
symbol that represents the Garcías’ upper-class status and power, which they abuse over their
servants. It is a private space where the legacy of colonialism is still very much present in the
1950s and 1960s, as it is revealed in the form of racism, classism, and social stratification.
Carla narrates that her mother Laura always said that Nivea, the latest of their laundry maids,
was “black-black” (García Girls 260). On her part, Nivea complains that their “work is never
done,” that they work night and day, and they get almost nothing in return (262). Thus, Nivea
expresses openly her discontent over the exploitation they endure as maids at the compound,
where they work without being paid fairly. Sofía/Fifi says that Chucha, who is the oldest
maid and cook, is “Haitian blue-black, not Dominican café-con-leche black” (218), and she
suspects due to prevailing racial stereotypes that Chucha “always had a voodoo job going”
(219), hence revealing the anti-blackness of Trujillo’s era that the girls internalize. According
to Silvio Torres-Saillant, during the Trujillo dictatorship “the Dominican state became most
emphatically committed to promoting Eurocentric and white supremacist views of Dominicaness” (132). The regime “outlawed participation in voodoo ceremonies,” in order “to eradicate African spiritual expressions in Dominican society” (133). The family compound is also a space where even the new young pantry maid Gladys has her own American Dream (Bess 96), but her desire for a better life remains impossible to attain. On top of everything else, Gladys is discriminated against by Laura, who says that Gladys is “only a country girl.” who does not know any better than to “wear her kinky hair in rollers” (García Girls 258). Later on, Gladys is also unfairly dismissed (273). Therefore, the family compound is a place that exemplifies what Massey calls space as “a product of relations of power” (“Concepts of Space and Power in Theory and in Political Practice” 18). The experience of inhabiting this space is different from people to people according to their class and race. The family compound represents the García de la Torres’ power, but for their maids it is a place of oppression and exploitation.

The family compound’s location reflects the García de la Torres’ position. In the space of the compound, three major forces are at work: the colonial past that results in exploitative relations between servants and masters, the threat of Trujillo’s regime, and the ever-present American influence due to the U.S. interventionism and cultural imperialism on the island. The back part of the property “adjoined the palacio of the dictator’s daughter and son-in-law,” in which Trujillo could be seen strolling “with his three-year-old grandson” (García Girls 233). Moreover, in her autobiographical essay “An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic,” Alvarez reveals that her family’s compound was next door to the American Embassy, which rented several of her grandfather’s buildings, and functioned as a “sanctuary,” if need be (80). Even though this is not explicitly disclosed in the novel, the García’s close proximity to the American Embassy is suggested through their close

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5 In his analysis of the García Girls, Luis states that Alvarez’s aforementioned essay “could have served as the original idea for the novel or a chapter that the author excluded” (“A Search for Identity” 843), given that the novel is semiautobiographical.
relationship with Victor Hubbard, or as the girls call him Tío Vic. Victor is the American consul at the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo (*García Girls* 211), and most importantly a secret CIA agent (217), who comes to their rescue when they need him. Consequently, the location of the García de la Torre family compound, which is situated between Trujillo’s threatening presence and the American Embassy, indicates the Garcías’ positionality, their upper-class status, and in a way their “in-betweenness,” even before immigrating. Above all, it signals their proximity to the promise of American freedom while still living in the Dominican Republic.

Aside from the location of the family’s compound, Alvarez illustrates through an abundance of American gifts that the girls receive, how the identities of the upper-class members of the García de la Torre family are already shaped by American culture and consumerism even before immigrating. More specifically, Yolanda, her sisters and cousins receive American gifts every time their relatives return to the island from New York City. The girls’ maternal grandfather, Don Edmundo Antonio de la Torre, has a position in the United Nations in New York, as a reluctant member of Trujillo’s corrupt regime (*García Girls* 226-27), which explains all these travels. These gifts are mostly from “F.A.O. Schwarz” (261, 277), an American company known for its expensive toys. According to Sarika Chandra, the gifts suggest that “the Garcías already have the money, the class status, and the family connections required to be quasi-‘Americanized’ before emigrating” (846). Furthermore, the García de la Torre family’s ability to travel to the U.S. often and without trouble from Trujillo’s regime is also very important, as it indicates a very privileged position that allows them to cross borders regularly. According to Alvarez, in “the Dominican Republic no one could travel without papers, and the dictatorship rarely granted anyone this special permission” (qtd. in Halloran 75). However, as Vivian Nun Halloran insightfully points out, “[d]espite these autocratic travel restrictions, the Alvarez family and most of the
wealthy Dominican protagonists of Julia Alvarez’s novels manage to obtain access to legal documents which let them travel abroad” (75), even during the *trujillato* (87). Consequently, the expensive American gifts signify both the García de la Torre family’s wealth and its powerful position even during Trujillo’s regime, as well as the strong ties its members maintain with the U.S. In addition, Alvarez indicates how the girls have early access to American culture and consumer goods even before immigrating.

Alvarez also uses the family compound as a space that represents the divide between the Garcías and the rest of the Dominicans in order to depict how the white upper-class Garcías’ racist attitude is expressed not only toward their servants, but also toward Trujillo’s *guardias* when they arrive in search of Carlos. More specifically, Alvarez juxtaposes Yoyo’s recollection of her father’s invented game “The Blood of the Conquistadores,” with her reaction towards the *guardias*. When Yoyo sees her father running in order to hide, she remembers in a flashback how during the game, her father, Carlos, holds her upside down by her feet until she admits that she has in fact inherited the blood of the Conquistadores. Then Carlos puts Yoyo right side up and he “laughs a great big Conquistador laugh that comes all the way from the green, motherland hills of Spain” (*García Girls* 197). Thus, the Garcías openly identify Spain as their motherland, the Conquistadores as their esteemed ancestors, and white European culture as their only heritage, and in this way they distance themselves from the rest of the people of the Dominican Republic, who are mostly mixed race. Right after this flashback, Yoyo sees the two *guardias*, and the first thing she notices is their “coffee-with-milk” skin color, which is the same color as the khaki these “creepy-looking men” wear, and she thinks that “they look all beige, which no one would ever pick as a favorite color” (197). In this way, Yoyo expresses the racist ideology she has internalized. Ibis Gómez-Vega highlights the fact that in “Santo Domingo, the García de la Torre family

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6 Translation of Spanish: police officers, guards
members proudly trace their lineage back to the *Conquistadores,*” and that they are “people born to wealth and privilege long before Trujillo’s reign” (85). Gómez-Vega also emphasizes that although the Garcías live “within the ‘third world,’ their lives are separate from the lives of the ordinary working class Dominican” (86), given that the family compound, whose “driveway looks like a Mercedes Benz car lot” (*García Girls* 129), is “enclosed by high walls that keep out the rest of society” (Gómez-Vega 86). Hence, Yoyo’s curious preoccupation with and distaste of the *guardias*’ skin color suggests that the girls have been taught to judge people on the basis of their skin color, even at this young age, and to regard those who are darker as inferior, not as equal members of the same society. This attitude is reinforced and symbolized by the compound’s walls, which guarantee distance and self-segregation from the rest of the Dominicans.

Laura exhibits an even more deep-seated racist and classist disdain towards the *guardias,* which seems to make her invincible in the spatial context of her family’s compound. Laura perceives the *guardias* as inferior due to their dark skin and rural background, and she does not recognize their authority, given that she believes that “deep down, they are still boys in rags bringing down coconuts for *el patrón*” when he visits his *fincas* with his family on Sundays” (*García Girls* 202). Laura uses her white upper-class status in order to reverse the power dynamics between her and the representatives of Trujillo’s authority. This is evident when Laura arrives at the compound, and as soon as she sees the *guardias,* she “switches into her grand manner,” because she knows that this “will usually disarm these poor lackeys from the countryside, who have joined the SIM*[^9]* in order to put money in their pockets, food and rum in their stomachs, and guns at their hips” (201-202). Laura also pours each *guardia* a Presidente beer “in the cheap glasses she keeps for servants” (203). With this gesture, Laura clearly suggests that to her the *guardias* are not

[^7]: Translation of Spanish: the master, boss
[^8]: Translation of Spanish: country house, estate
[^9]: SIM: Servicio de Inteligencia Militar, in English: Military Intelligence Service was Trujillo’s secret police.
that much different from her family’s lower-status servants. Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez emphasizes that the “Dominican story cannot be told without an understanding of the Spanish conquest and a Hispanic class system inherited from colonial Spain,” where “whites reigned supreme” (109). Thus, Laura’s socioeconomic position and white privilege give her a sense of superiority that almost prevents her from being afraid of the guardias, because the guardias are destitute country folk, who are basically forced to serve Trujillo in order to scrape by. Laura gets the upper hand, as she completely surmounts and ridicules the authority represented by the impoverished, mixed-race guardias of Trujillo’s regime, while her husband’s life is in danger.

Space again plays an important role in the final scene before fleeing the island, and indicates both the de la Torres’ affluence and American protection. In this scene, it is revealed that in contrast to working-class Dominicans who immigrate in search of a better life, what prompts the Garcías’ rushed migration as political exiles, is Carlos’ active participation in a failed attempt to assassinate Trujillo. The plan is orchestrated by the American Government and Carlos collaborates with Victor Hubbard, the American consul and CIA agent. As soon as Carlos sees the guardias arriving at the García de la Torre family compound he rushes into his hiding place (Garcia Girls 195-196). This is a small secret compartment Victor advised him to construct “behind a row of Laura’s dresses” at the back of a “large walk-in closet” (196, 203, 206-207). In there, Carlos keeps a revolver, which Victor has also smuggled in for him, because gun possession was illegal during Trujillo’s regime (196, 197). Through the description of this confined secret space, in which Carlos hides, it is suggested that the two things that protect his life are Laura’s family’s wealth, and their powerful connections with high-ranking U.S. government officials. Moreover, the Garcías leave protected by a CIA agent in his “limo,” which drives them to the airport for a flight arranged to get them to the U.S. (219), where Carlos “has been granted a fellowship at
a hospital” to work as a doctor (211-212). Thus, the Garcías already have a life plan waiting for them in America thanks to their connections. Chandra rightfully points out that the history of U.S. intervention and “neocolonial aggression” in the Dominican Republic is often downplayed, and it “is mentioned in much of the [American literary] scholarship on the novel in a cursory way” (845, 846). Moreover, Carlos’ cooperation with a CIA agent and the State Department indicates both the history of U.S. presence and intervention in the Dominican Republic, but also that “one’s identity shifts in relationship to the United States well before any physical act of immigration” (845). This is especially true for the upper-class Garcías, who have already incorporated American values and cultural elements into their identities, and go through a process of hybridization even before leaving the island. In addition, the conditions under which the Garcías leave suggest that they are in close proximity to what America represents, and this includes the American Dream and the promise of freedom.

1.2 The Garcías in the “Land of the Free”

The navigation of space in the U.S. entails a shift in the Garcías’ identities and a difficult period of adjustment during which they seek to reinstate their upper-class position. This means that aside from the promise of freedom, they also pursue other aspects of the American Dream, such as opportunity in the form of professional success, in order to maintain their prosperity in the U.S. When the girls first arrive in the U.S. they feel that they have lost many of the privileges they used to enjoy back in the Dominican Republic and they struggle to adjust to this new reality, while their father is trying to re-establish himself as a successful doctor. The experiences of migration and displacement render the girls and their parents vulnerable in the U.S., as their status is initially downgraded. This is evident in spatial descriptions, given that for their first year in New York the Garcías rent “a small apartment” (*García Girls* 166). The girls also complain that they do not have “the best the United States
In addition, Sandi realizes that one of the things that is missing in New York is “this kind of special attention paid to them” back home by their servants, where the García girls “were made to feel important” (174). Moreover, in the U.S., “the money [is] running out” (172), but in spite of these initial financial setbacks, the García still manage to have access to predominantly white affluent spaces. This is suggested by the fact that Laura’s father supports them financially and pays their rent in a doorman building (173, 174).

According to Lucía M. Suárez, Álvarez’s “loss of a homeland [. . .] is decisively complicated by the fact that she also experienced a privileged immigration” (126). Therefore, her “loss could be challenged because it contrasts with the experiences of those who continue to experience losses” such as, unskilled economic migrants (126). Suárez argues that this results in an “anxiety of representation,” which is “played out by the fictitious characters of the García Girls,” who are “caught between two countries,” and “two languages” (127). This is true, and it could also be argued that by depicting the García’s initial loss of socioeconomic status and power in the U.S., Álvarez’s novel partially reproduces the typical immigrant story, in which the pursuit of the American Dream and upward social mobility is central. However, the García’s never reach a point where they have to face the same struggles that working-class immigrants have to face in order to survive, yet they are seen as “Other” in the privileged spaces they have access to.

A central aspect of the García’s loss of power and status derives from the fact that they are no longer perceived as “white” in the U.S., a country, which like the Dominican Republic, is also a racially divided space, and in which they are seen as “Other.” This is evident in the chapter “Floor Show,” which is the first one chronologically that takes place in the U.S., and in which Álvarez illustrates how the girls and their mother face discrimination in the apartment building where they live. An old woman, whom the girls nickname “La
Bruja," and who lives in the apartment below, “had been complaining to the super since the day the family moved in” (García Girls 170). This woman also claims that “the Garcías should be evicted,” because their “food smell[s],” they speak “too loudly and not in English,” and the kids sound like “a heard of wild burros” (170). Moreover, one day soon after the Garcías move in, La Bruja stops Laura and the girls in the lobby and spits out “that ugly word the kids at school sometimes used: ‘Spics! Go back to where you came from!’” (171). This slur, exemplifies how the girls and their parents become targets in the U.S. of an overtly racist attack, given that they are racially “othered,” and undergo what Judith Butler calls “linguistic vulnerability” (16), as they become “vulnerable to a certain name-calling” (18). As Ta-Nehisi Coates points out, race is a social construct, which means that our notion of what constitutes “white” and what constitutes “black” is “a product of social context,” given that there is “no fixed sense” of “whiteness” or “blackness.” Consequently, Alvarez showcases how even though the Garcías consider themselves the white descendants of Spanish Conquistadores, their Hispanic cultural heritage is not perceived as white European in the U.S., but it is rather perceived as “Latin Americanness” and “Otherness.” Hence, the novel illustrates how race is indeed a social construct, given that what is considered “white” in one space, or in the context of one country with a specific history and legacy of colonialism, is not necessarily the same as in another country with a different history of colonialism.

In order to counteract this kind of racialized attack, the girls resist racial exclusion and othering by reasserting firmly their Spanish white European identity. This happens first in their New York apartment, and later on, at an expensive Spanish restaurant, during a “welcome to America” dinner invited by Dr. Fanning and his wife, a white American affluent couple. In the space of their New York apartment, Sandi and Yoyo play a game, in which

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10 Translation of Spanish: the witch
11 Translation of Spanish: donkeys
Sandi pretends to be the “Toro,” and Yoyo the bullfighter as she shouts “¡OLE!” and stamps her feet in triumph, although she knows that it will annoy “La Bruja downstairs” (García Girls 171). Later on, at the upscale Spanish restaurant, another privileged space that suggests entry and access, Sandi feels ethnic pride while she watches the Flamenco female dancers’ performance. Sandi admires the dancers’ confidence and her heart soars, as she thinks that this “wild and beautiful dance came from people like her, Spanish people” (185). Moreover, Sandi, who out of the four sisters is considered the prettiest one because she is “a girl who could pass as American, with soft blue eyes and fair skin” (181), notices that all the customers in the expensive Spanish restaurant are white Americans (179). Thus, Sandi thinks that “Spanish [is] something other people [pay] to be around,” and that “La Bruja was wrong” (179). Critic Ellen C. Maycock notes that the text “draws a family tree that serves to trace Yolanda and her sisters’ roots back to the conquistadors,” and so the girls’ young identity and cultural pride are rooted in all things “Spanish” (qtd. in Frever 130). Trinna S. Frever argues that this association is problematic as it “has potentially imperialist overtones,” but the girls’ focus on “the strength of a culturally ‘Spanish’ identity” serves as “an important tool for survival within their new environment” (139). Consequently, in this difficult initial stage of migration, every time the girls feel that their cultural identity is under attack for being perceived as inferior or Latin American, they react by reasserting their Spanish white European ancestry. This happens not only because a “Spanish” identity is a source of pride for them, but also because perhaps it is an identity that is more readily accepted in the U.S., and could even stake a claim to the American Dream.

Soon enough however, the Garcías leave the small apartment, and when they celebrate a year of living in the States, they move to the suburbs of Long Island, just outside of New York City, a privileged space that suggests access to the American Dream, even

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12 Translation of Spanish: bull
though they continue being perceived as the “Other.” At this point Trujillo is already dead, but the Garcías decide to stay in the U.S. and to put down “roots” in a neighborhood of “look-alike house[s],” where “the girls could have a yard to play in” (García Girls 151). American suburbs have been historically associated with a social phenomenon known as “white flight,” a process of white self-segregation that began, according to Emily Badger, “in the first decades of the 20th century.” Moreover, according to Leah Platt Boustan, suburbanization peaked between the 1940s and 1970s, during which many white middle-class families moved out of the cities and relocated to the suburbs (“Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight’?” 417, 418, 419). The suburbs were “a magnet for newly prosperous families after World War II seeking larger houses and more open space” (“The Culprits Behind White Flight”). Given that this section of Alvarez’s novel takes place around 1961-1962, it is clear that the Garcías move into a predominately white middle-class suburb. Halloran points out that “wealthy Dominican characters in Alvarez’s canon,” who legally immigrate to the U.S. settle down in “exclusive suburbs of major metropolitan areas” (77). They exhibit a “pattern of exilic immigration and self-imposed isolation from other Latinos,” which means that they “exist as insular pockets of cultural and linguistic ‘otherness’ within a larger, predominantly white, Anglo majority in the United States” (79-80). Moreover, William A. V. Clark asserts that homeownership is “a core part of the dream,” as it provides security and implies “putting down roots” (8). Homeownership also has a “symbolic meaning beyond the value and assets of the home and is interconnected with the notions of upward and outward mobility—of increasing household assets and relocation to the suburbs” (8). Furthermore, Fraga et al.’s

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13 The name of this suburb is not mentioned in the novel, but since Alvarez has admitted that the novel is strongly based on her own experience, it might be a fictional version of Jamaica Estates, a predominantly white upper-middle-class neighborhood in Queens, where Alvarez grew up and about which she has written in at least two of her essays: “On Finding a Latino Voice,” and “A White Woman of Color.” Alvarez explains her experience of being racialized in the U.S., even though she and her family self-identified as white. However, she also admits that they were “lucky to be white Dominicans,” because as she asserts: “Had we been darker, we certainly could not have bought our mock Tudor house in Jamaica Estates” (“A White Woman of Color” 144).
research has also shown that being able to move out of the “barrios”14 and homeownership are definitely two central components of the American Dream for Latinas/os (34, 35). Consequently, the white middle-class suburb where the Garcías choose to set up their house, and where there are no other Latinos, suggests that their white privilege and socioeconomic position give them access to spaces, which indicate that, unlike darker working-class Dominican immigrants, they already live the American Dream within a year of their arrival.

In this white Anglo-American suburban space, where the Garcías choose to live due to their socioeconomic class, Carla the older sister, who struggles the most both with the English language and with homesickness, faces difficulties with navigating public space as an adolescent girl in her new country. Carla becomes the victim of racist and gender-based attacks, and she is portrayed as inhabiting a space of “in-betweenness” filled with conflict, where she does not feel that she belongs. Carla is targeted every day by a gang of four or five blond boys on the playground of the private Catholic school where Laura decides to enroll her (García Girls 152, 153, 154). The boys repeat La Bruja’s racist attack: “Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!” (153). Then, to add insult to injury, one of the boys pulls Carla’s blouse out of her skirt, and snickers “[n]o titties,” another boy yanks down her socks, “displaying her legs, which had begun growing soft, dark hairs,” and yells to his pals “[m]onkey legs!” and then they mock her accent (153). These boys’ racist attacks aim to make Carla doubt her humanity by equating her to a monkey. Luis claims that the “discrimination of North Americans toward Hispanics in Alvarez’s work,” and especially toward Carla García “is similar to the one” the García family members exhibit “toward servants in general and Haitians in particular while living in the Dominican Republic” (“A Search for Identity” 841). At the same time, the attack is also sexist, as the boys physically assault Carla’s rapidly changing body, for which she feels “secret shame” (García Girls

14 Translation of Spanish: neighborhood, but in the U.S. “el barrio” is a predominantly Latina/o/x neighborhood, e.g. the Spanish Harlem in New York City.
153,154), while she is struggling to deal with adolescence. Chris Shilling points out that boys draw on patriarchal “rules” and “resources” in “using space as a way of asserting dominance” over girls, even on the playground (23-24, 36). As a result, “sexual harassment is an everyday part of life for many girls at school,” given that boys feel that “they have a right to comment on, touch and even attack girls’ bodies” (34). Consequently, inhabiting a space of “in-betweenness” as a young female immigrant is a traumatic experience for Carla. The boys’ cruel body-shaming tactics indicate that while navigating public space Carla is attacked both as a racialized “Other” and as a female body in the patriarchal society of her new country.

This becomes even more obvious through Carla’s second incident of experiencing sexual harassment, which takes place on the street as she walks home from school, but this time it is instigated by an adult exhibitionist, who follows her with his car from the bus stop (García Girls 155-157). However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this incident is its outcome, given that Laura calls the police without a second thought, since they live in “a law-abiding family neighborhood” (158). This suggests that the neighborhood is upper-middle-class, but more importantly that as “legal residents,” even if they are not yet citizens (160), the Garcías have a completely different experience of navigating space in the U.S. in comparison to other darker working-class Latinos. As white upper-class legal residents, the Garcías seem to be unaware of a long history of police brutality perpetrated against the Latino community in the U.S., as both Julissa Arce and Suzanne Gamboa point out. Torres-Saillant and Hernández also refer to the Dominican-American community’s distrust of the police (10).15 There is a great gap between the reality of less privileged members of the Dominican-American community, who would probably not feel as comfortable to call the

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15 Torres-Saillant and Hernández begin the first chapter of The Dominican Americans with a description of an instance of “Dominican upheaval” in New York City in 1992, caused by what seemed like an incident of police brutality. A young Dominican man “had died in the lobby of his own building at the hands of a police officer in Washington Height” (9). This incident, although officially dismissed as a case of self-defense, it revealed some of the “problems besetting [the Dominican-American] community: overcrowded schools and apartments, distrust of the police, high rates of unemployment, a thriving drug trade, and widespread poverty” (10).
police, and the García’s reality in the scene in which Laura calls the police and Carla believes that American policemen are “nice guys” (*García Girls* 158). Crenshaw argues that focusing on “the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination” (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” 140). Consequently, this scene signifies both the García’s class and race privilege, given that they are able to call the police without fear of deportation or police brutality, but also serves as a reminder of the heterogeneity of the Latina/o/x community. Factors such as immigration status, class, race and gender, determine how Latinas/os navigate space in the U.S., as well as their access to or exclusion from the American Dream.

After three to four years, the García’s become American citizens. The U.S. officially becomes their second country and a space where they regain certain aspects of their previous position as respectable upper-middle-class citizens. First comes Carlos’ professional and financial success. Yolanda narrates that her father’s successful “Centro de Medicina” in the Bronx was thronged with the sick and the homesick yearning to go home again (*García Girls* 139). The girls also say that “Papi had started making real money in his office up in the Bronx” (109). What is more, Carlos makes so much money that later on, when the girls are mature adults, every year on his birthday he “distribute[s] bulky envelopes” that contain “no less than several hundreds in bills” (25). Following his success as a doctor, Carlos becomes a U.S. citizen when he returns to New York after “a trial visit” to the Dominican Republic, and he says that he has “given up,” because there is “no hope for the Island,” and he declares: “I will become un dominican-york,” (107). Thus, Carlos “raise[s] his right hand and [swears] to defend the Constitution of the United States,” and the girls say: “we [are] here to stay” (107). According to Luis, Carlos’ “generous source of income” as a doctor contributes to his

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16 Translation of Spanish: medical center, but in this case most probably a private practice.
17 Translation of Spanish: a Dominican-New Yorker.
daughters’ integration into North American culture, as he is able to pay for “the best and most expensive schools” (“A Search for Identity” 842). Moreover, Luis rightfully asserts that Alvarez’s characters live the “American Dream,” and that “[w]ith the passage of time, the status of the García family becomes more permanent and their lives resemble not so much those of other Hispanics living in the United States, as those of their North American counterparts” (“A Search for Identity” 842). Therefore, even though the Garcías initially go through a challenging period of adjustment during which they face discrimination, thanks to Carlos’ professional success, they eventually decide to settle permanently in the U.S., and they become officially U.S. citizens, something which denotes their new identity as Dominican-Americans.

Laura also has a desire to pursue her own American Dream, which she is free to do, unlike her maid, who is excluded from such aspirations. Primitiva is “a maid from the Island” who lives with the Garcías and spends her days cleaning their home, while Laura begins “spreading her wings, taking adult courses in real estate and international economics and business management” (García Girls 114, 116). In ¡Yo!, a sequel to the García Girls in which Yolanda is portrayed as a successful writer, Alvarez reveals that Primitiva is actually a racist nickname that Laura’s family, the de la Torres, gave to their maid when they hired her as a young girl from the countryside (66). Primitiva’s actual name is María Trinidad, but after spending “her whole life working for the de la Torres,” she has trouble remembering who she is (66), because of all the exploitation she has endured. Halloran points out that the only contact Alvarez’s protagonists have with other immigrants is with the domestic servants that live with them, as they recreate in the U.S. “the very patriarchal family household model they preserve in the Dominican Republic” (81). The contrast between Laura’s American emancipation and María Trinidad’s ongoing exploitation in the U.S. reflects the asymmetrical power that Bell Hooks examines in her intersectional analysis. While discussing feminist
class struggle and inequality, Hooks argues that “[p]rivileged women wanted equality with men of their class,” which neatly coincided with the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal existing structure (40). What is more, “since privileged men did not become equal caretakers in the domestic household, the freedom of privileged-class women of all races has required the sustained subordination of working-class and poor women” (41). Therefore, even though America represents for Laura a space of new opportunities, liberty, and even the possibility of pursuing her own version of the American Dream, for her maid living in the U.S. is almost the same as living on the island. For as long as Laura is refusing to pay a fair salary to María Trinidad, she is reproducing the Island’s colonial unequal power relations in the U.S.

1.3 The García Girls’ “In-betweenness” and the American Dream

Meanwhile, the García girls adjust and begin to enjoy the American lifestyle, and America does not seem like such an intimidating place as it did when they first arrived. America rather starts to represent a space of freedom, in contrast to the Dominican Republic, which now represents a place of patriarchal restrictions. This process of further hybridization becomes evident in the chapter “A Regular Revolution,” where the girls narrate that by “the end of a couple of years away from home, we had more than adjusted” (García Girls 109). The girls also confess: “We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man. Island was the hair-and-nails crowd, chaperones, and icky boys with all their macho strutting” (108-109). Furthermore, Carlos is more than willing to pay good money to “straighten [the girls’] teeth and smooth the accent out of their English in expensive schools” (36). In addition, after Carla’s harassment, and an incident in which some “girlfriend of Sandi’s got her to try a Tampax,” Laura enrolls the girls in an all-girls preparatory boarding school in Boston, where they would “meet and mix with the ‘right kind’ of Americans” (107, 108). All these actions signal a process of hybridization and a desire to
integrate into the American society, which reflect Bhabha’s argument according to which “‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity” (*The Location of Culture* 1). Moreover, Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez asserts that “Alvarez’s work continually explores her own hyphen identity, that of being neither entirely Dominican nor American” (105). Alvarez often refers to herself as “a Dominican gringa, or the hybrid offspring of Dominicans” (105). This process of hybridization and integration, which is facilitated by the Garcías’ class, is clearly illustrated in the novel when the girls are teenagers, and later on college students, along with their concurrent experiences with “in-betweenness.”

The García girls’ experience in the very elite space of the boarding school suggests “in-betweenness” and a process of integration, access to high quality education, as well as a sense of freedom associated with the idea of the American Dream. The García girls meet indeed heiresses of “the cream of the American crop,” like “the Hoover girl and the Hanes twins” (*García Girls* 108). However, they clarify that these “brand-named” American rich girls “didn’t exactly mix with us,” because they “simply assumed that, like all third world foreign students in boarding schools, we were filthy rich and related to some dictator or other” (108). Hence, the García girls say that what bothered them in that exclusive space was that their “privilege smacked of evil and mystery,” whereas the American girls’ privilege “came in recognizable panty hose packages and [. . .] vacuum cleaner bags” (108). This indicates that the García girls’ wealth is not readily accepted by their American counterparts, who perceive it as rather suspicious. In spite of this annoyance, the girls take pleasure in being there, because the school is “a long train ride” away from their parents, and this allows them to enjoy the freedom that other American teenagers enjoy (108). The girls say that they could smoke, go to dances, kiss boys, and even forge Laura’s signature in order to go “just about everywhere” (108). All these attitudes suggest that the girls’ Americanization coexists
with their “in-betweenness.” Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh and Wolfgang Berg argue that contemporary migrants are “liberated from the binary oppositions that functioned in the past to define and inscribe them within clear-cut narratives of belonging, and are now free to assume multiple and hybrid identities” (9). Mariana Ortega describes “the multiplicitous self as being-between-worlds and being-in-worlds—the multiplicitous self is thus an in-between self” (50). Therefore, even though the García girls do not become intimate friends with the daughters of the American elite, they do have access to the same privileged spaces that they have thanks to their socioeconomic class, and thus their “in-betweenness” does not entail exclusion. On the contrary, it suggests integration, given that the boarding school provides the García girls with the education, the language knowledge, the socialization, and the opportunities to live their own American Dream, which for them when they are young is associated primarily with a sense of freedom.

Ironically, after Laura’s efforts to facilitate the girls’ socialization with the “right kind” of Americans, both Laura and Carlos start to worry that their daughters are becoming too “Americanized.” Consequently, they decide to start sending the girls back to the Dominican Republic every summer, in order to reconnect with their extended family and their homeland. These back-and-forth repeated border-crossings further represent the girls’ “in-betweenness,” because after having adopted American attitudes, a process they describe as “a regular revolution” (García Girls 111), they dislike the idea of being forced to spend the whole summer on the Island (109). The girls’ Americanization includes their exposure to feminist ideals, something which is indicated when Yoyo brings the book Our Bodies, Our Selves into the house (110), and also when they mention having read Simone de Beauvoir, and having “planned lives of [their] own” (119). Therefore, every time the girls visit the Island they are annoyed by the prevailing sexist double standards, and they enjoy confessing to their “over-chaperoned girl cousins the naughtinesses [they] had committed up in the home
of the brave and the land of the free” (113-114). What is more, after Fifi is punished with a year of “Island confinement” (116), for having weed in her bedroom (114, 115), the girls find their youngest most rebellious “maverick” sister, “so changed” (117). They are afraid that Fifi is “brainwashed” (126), and “regressing into some nice third-world girl” (118). But the last straw is when the girls find out that Fifi’s sexist boyfriend, Manuel Gustavo, is pressuring her to have sex without contraception, which is almost impossible to get on the Island, and hence they make it their mission to put an end to “Fifi’s exile” (117, 122, 123, 126). In retrospect, the girls say that only after their feminist revolution, they won back their summers and their lives became finally their own (111). Thus, it becomes evident that when the girls become young adults, they perceive the Island as a type of prison, due to its dominant patriarchal ideology. Cristina Chevereșan points out that the girls’ “identities are literally trans-formed, shaped by and in between two geographical and mental spaces [. . .], across physical and psychological frontiers” (85). Thus, Alvarez’s novel exemplifies what Massey’s spatial theory asserts, that “[g]eography matters to the construction of gender” (Space, Place, and Gender 2). As a result, the girls see how their lives would be restricted by patriarchal oppression in the Dominican Republic, and they feel that their homeland is no longer their home. In contrast, the U.S. represents a future of possibilities, and a place that can accommodate the girls’ sense of freedom and aspirations, which they can pursue, even if from a space of “in-betweenness.”

The García girls also have access to colleges in the U.S. that most working-class Latina/o/x immigrants probably did not have at the time. In the end, the García sisters have access to higher education and the freedom to pursue their aspirations, but their “in-betweenness” is at times filled with conflict. Three out of the four sisters become indeed “[p]rofessional women” with “degrees on the wall!” (García Girls 28). Clark asserts that college education is part of the American Dream (60), and Fraga et al.’s research concurs that
for Latina/o/x immigrants quality education is an integral part of the Dream (35). Even Sofía, who has a fraught relationship with her father and drops out of college to work as a secretary, eventually gets married and lives a fairly typical American life with her husband and two kids in the suburbs of Michigan (García Girls 29, 32, 33, 35). Nevertheless, as they grow into mature adults the García sisters take the bad with the good that America has to offer. They go through mental breakdowns and broken relationships (47, 51, 79, 80). These problems perhaps suggest the negative aspects of espousing an American lifestyle, which prioritizes individualism and the pursuit of professional success over a sense of community and belonging. Luis argues that as “the sisters incorporate themselves into North American culture, they suffer the same problems associated with the middle and upper middle class mainstream citizens” (“A Search for Identity” 842). The intermingling of positive and negative aspects indicates that the nature of the American Dream itself is contradictory. For the García sisters America is indeed the land of freedom and opportunity, where they can study, work and fulfill their aspirations, however the downside of individualism is that it leads to alienation.

Yolanda in particular, who many critics have identified as Alvarez’s fictional alter ego and main protagonist, is a character that dramatizes and embodies both the advantages of living “in-between” two cultures and languages, as well as the struggle of feeling alienated in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. This experience leads Yolanda to find refuge in writing. Her nickname alludes to the toy “Yoyo” (García Girls 68), which according to Luis suggests the movement “from one culture to the other” (“A Search for Identity” 847). In “Antojos,” the first chapter in the novel, and the last one chronologically, Yolanda returns to the Island in her thirties after five years of absence looking for some sense of home and belonging, only to find herself out of place, a stranger in her own homeland. In this case, “in-betweenness” results in alienation and homelessness, given that Yolanda “has never felt at
home in the States” (*García Girls* 12), and she does not feel at home in the Dominican Republic either. As an adult, Yolanda goes to graduate school for a Master’s degree, she becomes a “writer-slash-teacher,” and she gives poetry readings (46). Thus emerges the picture of Yolanda as a struggling professional writer, who writes in English and creates her own narrative space. Julie Barak emphasizes that “Yolanda’s writing helps her to accept her own ‘hybrid’ nature, to create her own multilingual language (as Bakhtin defines it)”\(^{18}\)–one that will aid her in bringing both her worlds and all her selves into balance, regulating the whirling of the gyre that has been her life” (175). According to Avtar Brah, “home” is “a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation,” it is a sense of “feeling at home” (4). In an interview with Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia, Alvarez has stated that writing and “the world of imagination” is the place she feels “most at home in” (32). Consequently, Yolanda’s struggle to become a professional writer mirrors both the pursuit of her own American Dream and the process of eventually finding a sense of “home” in her writing. A “home” that counteracts the alienation that comes along with inhabiting a space of “in-betweenness” in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic.

It is suggested throughout the novel that Yolanda’s dream is to become a professional writer in English. Her special relation to the English language and her desire to become a writer recur time and again in the *García Girls*. Yolanda’s exposure to English starts early on, when she still lives with her family in the Dominican Republic and receives as a gift an English translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* (*García Girls* 229, 232). It is implied that this book is the most significant gift Yolanda receives and, at the same time, it suggests what Néstor García Canclini calls a “process of hybridization” (xxvii, xxviii). Yolanda soon becomes fascinated by Scheherazade’s tale and the way that she uses storytelling as a trick in order to survive (*García Girls* 231-232). According to Jessica Wells

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\(^{18}\) Bakhtin says that the writer of prose “attempts to talk about his own world in an alien language . . . he often measures his own work by alien linguistic standards” (qtd. in Barak 175).
Cantiello, the “figure of Scheherazade, Alvarez’s shorthand for the power of storytelling, features prominently as encouraging Yo to tell stories” (99). Joan M. Hoffman has observed that in the novel, “[l]anguage, in both its form and its content, is an important unifying agent” (22), and Yolanda “understands and respects the power of words” (23). Later on, when Yolanda is a teenager, she is already a budding writer, as she writes “her secret poems in her new language” (García Girls 136), because in New York, “she [takes] root in the language,” and by high school, “the nuns [are] reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class” (141). After a fight with her father about a speech Yolanda wrote inspired by Walt Whitman, Carlos buys Yolanda “a brand new electric typewriter” (142, 149), thus eventually encouraging his daughter’s penchant for writing. Consequently, Yolanda’s “in-betweenness” finds an outlet in storytelling, and English, her second language, becomes a medium of personal expression in her new country, something which suggests that she is claiming her own space in the U.S.

Inhabiting a space “in-between” cultures, countries, and languages can be an empowering experience, if the subject is in a position to adopt and use the tools of the dominant culture. Yolanda uses English, her second language, as a tool in her profession that allows her eventually to attain her own American Dream. What is foreshadowed in the García Girls is fully realized in the sequel ¡Yo!, in which Yolanda is depicted as a successful writer after the publication of her first novel based on her life’s events. Bhabha argues that the borderline work of culture “creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation,” such art renews the past, “refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space” (7). While discussing Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands, Sara Ahmed et al. point out that as “cultural and spatial boundaries are reconfigured in this contested border-zone, new ‘homes’ and ‘migrations’ also become intelligible in the form of hybridized cultures without ‘pure’ origins” (4). Therefore, it could be argued that thanks to her ability to use the English
language in an innovative way through her position of “in-betweeness,” Yolanda offers a new perspective and creates a story that reflects the experience of inhabiting the space “in-between.” Ultimately, Yolanda’s hybridized cultures and “in-betweeness” find their definitive expression in her writing that becomes the vehicle that leads her to live her own American Dream.
CHAPTER TWO

The “Outsider-Within” and Exclusion from the American Dream in

Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana*

Like the *García Girls*, Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana* is also a novel that draws inspiration from a true story, as it is loosely based on the personal story of migration that Cruz’s mother experienced. *Dominicana* is set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement in 1965, which is also the year of the U.S. invasion in the Dominican Republic. Cruz presents Ana Canción, the fifteen-year-old protagonist and narrator of the novel, as a mixed-race rural working-class girl, who is light-skinned with green eyes. Thus, Ana is a complex character who does not fit neatly into racial categories. Ana is married off to Juan, a thirty-two-year-old man, in order to immigrate and escape poverty, but she finds herself trapped as an underage bride in New York City. She abruptly transitions from girlhood to motherhood, from Dominican countryside schoolgirl to undocumented immigrant.

In this chapter, I employ again an intersectional approach and in the end I also use the decolonial concept of “‘world’-traveling.” I employ Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the “outsider-within” in a broader sense and as a point of entry in order to contextualize Ana’s lived experience. Ana has an “outsider” status in the Dominican Republic’s stratified society, as a mixed-race rural working-class girl, and later on, she inhabits an “outsider-within” social location in the U.S., as an undocumented immigrant. I argue that through Ana’s spatial exclusion and confinement Cruz suggests the protagonist’s exclusion from the American Dream of upward social mobility, due to obstacles resulting from intersecting forms of gender, race, and class oppression that position her as an outsider. Even though Ana eventually performs acts of resistance to her exclusion and starts navigating New York City, her dream of prosperity is never fulfilled. In the end, Ana enjoys some relative sense of
freedom, she pursues opportunity even if unsuccessf ully, and she remains hopeful about the future in the face of adversity.

In an interview with Arriel Vinson, Cruz asserts that Ana’s plight is her desire to make something of herself, “despite having multiple obstacles.” Cruz has stated that her goal was to write a novel about the lived experience of working-class women of color, whose stories are “under-documented” (Interview with Crystal Hana Kim). Thus, Cruz resists through her writing the historical erasure of underprivileged groups. Cruz describes herself as a “black-identified Dominican,” and a “light-skinned Latina” (Interview with Nelly Rosario 744). She recognizes the Dominican experience as part of the African diaspora, due to a shared “history of plantation” (Interview by Silvio Torres-Saillant 113). In *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-first Century*, Juanita Heredia asserts that Cruz is “preoccupied with representing various racial groups, particularly people of African and Chinese descent, who have formed Dominican diasporic communities in the United States” (11). Cruz examines gender in connection to race “in the development of a specific mixed-racial heritage Latina identity,” in relation to transnational migration (11). Therefore, in Cruz’s work race plays an equally important role as gender. Heredia suggests that Cruz belongs to a group of Latina writers, alongside Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Marta Moreno Vega, and Marie Arana, who are “involved in a decolonizing process by writing and relocating subaltern cultures from their respective national heritages and the United States to the forefront” (5). The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci first used the term “subaltern” during his imprisonment in order to avoid censorship “as a codeword for any class of people (but especially peasants and workers) subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class” (“Subaltern”). In postcolonial studies, Gayatri Spivak defines the subaltern as “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism” (45), thus denoting an outsider status with regard to the dominant culture. Michael Jones-Corra
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identifies three factors that set immigrants apart and mark them as outsiders: “lack of
citizenship, a shared language and social acceptance.” In the novel, Ana is an undocumented
immigrant, who does not speak English. Her experience in the U.S. is defined by these two
parameters that mark her as an outsider. Being an outsider means that Ana’s access to the
American Dream is obstructed by her marginal socioeconomic position, lack of English
language proficiency, and lack of documentation. Therefore, Ana is an “outsider” figure in
the Dominican Republic, as a mixed-race rural working-class girl who comes from a
subaltern background that is relegated to the margins, and then she inhabits an “outsider-
within” social location in the U.S., as an undocumented immigrant.

Collins initially developed the concept of the “outsider-within,” in order to describe
the social location of Black female domestic workers within white spaces, where they “would
remain outsiders” in “a peculiar marginality,” because they were “economically exploited
workers” (10, 11). Margaret D. Kamitsuka interprets Collins’ “outsider-within” notion in a
more general sense, as the “the relationship between women of color and white culture”
(174). This chapter employs Collins’ “outsider-within” concept in a broader sense, given that
Ana rarely navigates predominantly white spaces in order to contextualize her marginal
position as an outsider. As an undocumented immigrant in the U.S., Ana finds herself an
outsider excluded from the American Dream, even as she is living and moving “within” the
space of New York City, the quintessential metropolis that in a way stands as a spatial
representation of the idea of the American Dream. New York City is the place where Ana is
led to believe she will have a better life, but instead, once she arrives, she experiences
domestic confinement, due to patriarchal oppression exercised by Juan, and later on, she
realizes the difficulty of making her own money. Thus, Ana is faced with the contradictions
between the promise of a better life in New York and the reality. According to Nancy
Isenberg, the U.S. has perpetuated for centuries certain foundational myths, among which the
most uncompromising is the myth of “American exceptionalism,” or the belief that America is “unique and different” and that the absence of class is one of the country’s hallmarks. Thus, “the very act of migration” is supposed to “equalize the people involved, molding them into a homogeneous, effectively classless society.” Cruz seems to question this American foundational myth from a Dominican-American perspective, given that by the end of the story, even though Ana is hopeful about the future, and navigates public space in New York City, she still remains an outsider without being able to escape her class.

In the first subsection of this chapter, I begin by examining the first chapters of *Dominicana* that take place in the Dominican Republic in order to explore Ana’s “outsider” status in the space of her own country. I investigate the material conditions of Ana’s life, issues of class, race, and colorism, the influence of the American Dream, and the reasons that lead to her arranged marriage to Juan as an underage girl and, subsequently, to her immigration as an undocumented immigrant. The second subsection explores Ana’s spatial confinement in New York City, and the factors that obstruct her pursuit of the American Dream. I argue that Ana’s exclusion from the American Dream is suggested by her spatial confinement, which entails her exclusion from the public sphere. The third subsection examines navigating public space in New York City as an “outsider-within,” and how Cruz offers, through Ana’s precarious exploration, a portrait of the cityscape from the standpoint of a young, female, struggling undocumented immigrant, who resists her exclusion, but at the same time remains excluded. In this subsection, I employ Lugones’ concept of “‘world’-traveling,” to argue that Ana’s exploration of New York represents an act of resistance, a struggle for freedom and self-determination, as well as a manifestation of Ana’s deep desire to attain the American Dream. Ana resists the parameters of her exclusion, and as she navigates public space she becomes part of the cityscape. In the final scene, important
changes take place that renew Ana’s hope, but at the same time her exclusion from upward
social mobility remains unresolved.

2.1 An “Outsider” in the Dominican Republic

In the first part of the novel, Cruz depicts the hardships of Ana’s life in the
Dominican Republic, and the reasons that lead her to marry Juan and to immigrate to the
U.S., thus putting forward the protagonist’s “outsider” status even in her own country before
emigrating. In order to shed light on the reasons why Ana’s mother pressures her underage
daughter to get married to a man more than twice her age, Cruz highlights the fact that Ana
and her family are poor people, and draws attention to the space Ana inhabits. Ana lives in a
small house with her parents, two brothers, one sister, and two orphaned female cousins in
Los Guayacanes (Dominicana 7, 11), a small seaside town about an hour away from the
capital of Santo Domingo. The space Ana and her family inhabit is defined by material
depprivation. It is a place where the “power outages can last fifteen hours at a time” (3). When
it rains, the house floor floods with water, and the four girls share a bed separated by a
“threadbare” sheet from the two boys’ bed (7). Consequently, for the most part Ana and her
family are depicted sitting outside in their yard, because it is cooler than their house, which is
“a real furnace” (33). Living in such dire conditions, the family cannot even afford to
immigrate. Thus, Juan is presented as a solution to the problem of poverty. Ana narrates that
Juan is seen by her family, and especially by her mother, as “the ticket for all of us to
eventually go to America” (36). The whole family sits outside even when Juan officially asks
Ana’s hand in marriage (19). Thus, the yard becomes the setting of important events.
According to Stanka Radović, there is “a unique genre of Caribbean fiction,” called the “yard
novel,” which chronicles “the shortage of adequate living conditions,” and suggests “the
centrality of spatial considerations” (22). Silvio Torres-Saillant asserts that the Dominican
Republic is a country where “white supremacist thought and negrophobic discourse” are still a problem (143). Consequently, it could be argued that by highlighting the poverty of Ana’s home, and by positioning Ana mainly outside in the yard in order to feed the chickens, or even to be asked in marriage, Cruz signals her symbolic position as an “outsider” figure, literally and figuratively. Ana is an outsider, who as a mixed-race working-class Dominican citizen inhabits a marginal position in the racially stratified society of the Dominican Republic.

Ana’s complex relationship to race and colorism is foregrounded from the opening pages of the novel. Colorism in particular is a recurring issue in the novel, given that skin tone is an important factor when it comes to upward social mobility in a racially stratified society. According to Lori L. Tharps, colorism is “the privileging of light skin over dark” even in the black community, and Alice Walker is often credited with using the term first. In the novel, it is suggested but not explicitly stated that Ana has light skin. She is presented as a beautiful mixed-race girl, who has green eyes, which she has inherited presumably from her white grandfather (Dominicana 11). Ana’s mother says that her eyes are “a winning lottery ticket” (11). In other words, Ana’s green eyes are seen as a ticket out of Dominican poverty, and into American prosperity, because she has more chances of being chosen by a man like Juan Ruiz, who already lives in New York, to be his bride. Thus, Ana’s light skin and especially her green eyes are perceived as desirable features, because they signal “whiteness.” These features allow Ana and her mother to hope that she can pursue the American Dream, even from her outsider’s position, as a mixed-race girl in a racially stratified society like the one in the Dominican Republic, whose history is marked by the legacy of colonialism and Trujillo’s racist regime.

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19 In an interview with Courtney Collins, Cruz clarifies that Ana has indeed light skin. In the novel it is also suggested that there is a difference between Ana and Juan, who is paler than her and white-presenting.
Another reason why Ana’s mother pressures her daughter to marry Juan is also because Juan is pale and white-presenting. Ana’s mother, who has black ancestry, says to her daughter that Juan’s pale skin is “better for the children’s sake,” because “[d]ark children suffer too much” (Dominicana 38). This is an example of what people colloquially call in Latin America “mejorar la raza.” Malinda Marie Williams explains that “mejorar la raza,” which literally means “improve the race” through the practices of miscegenation and “marrying white,” has been a cultural imperative in the Spanish Caribbean since the Spanish colonial period (108). According to Maria Alejandra Casale-Hardin, “mejorar la raza” is still a common phrase used in Latin American countries and a pervasive idea, which implies that “you should marry or have children with a whiter person so you’ll have better-looking kids.”

Most importantly, Jennifer E. Irish points out that “because of anti-blackness and pro-European values permeating the national discourse, the ideal Dominican (man or woman) is light-skinned, embodying closer ties to Europe” (69). As a result, Dominican women should “constantly seek to better themselves, their families, and the nation through (racially) advantageous marriage and reproduction” (69). By depicting how Ana’s mother pressures her own daughter to procreate whiter children, Cruz highlights the complex issues of race and colorism in the Dominican society. Ana’s mother understands that Ana and her future children will have better chances at attaining the American Dream, if Ana gets married to a white-presenting man like Juan.

Cruz also highlights the powerful influence of the idea of the American Dream on the island, and how it played a role in persuading Ana to get married without wanting to. As a girl living in poverty, the issue of considering Ana’s wishes, or even her basic human rights, becomes a moot point; survival takes precedence and an arranged marriage seems like the only solution. Both Ana’s mother and Juan link this marriage to a better life, and in their effort to convince the reluctant young girl, they entice her with the allure of the American
Dream. When Ana is eleven years old and Juan arrives at her parents’ house to court her outside in their yard for the first time, Ana says that “[e]veryone knows who the Ruiz brothers are because they travel to and from New York, returning with pockets full of dollars” (Dominicana 4). Then Juan proposes for the first time while he is drunk and slurs: “Marry me. I’ll take you to America” (4). In fact, Ana never wants, nor truly consents to this marriage, but she is rather pressured into it by her mother, who is mesmerized by the Ruiz brothers’ “bragging about their trips to New York,” and their stories so “full of hope” (12). Yolanda Machado points out that according to UNICEF, “the Dominican Republic has had one of Latin America’s highest rates of child marriages and early unions,” a practice that affects primarily girls. Only recently, on January 6th 2021, the President Luis Abinader signed a bill that bans marriage for individuals under the age of eighteen (Machado). Cruz wanted to shed light on this underrepresented reality (“What We Deserve”). However, in spite of Ana’s reluctance, her “[d]read and fear” turn into excitement right after Juan’s second and official proposal when she is fifteen years old (Dominicana 19, 21). Ana starts dreaming that she will be “the woman with dollars, and fine clothes, and beautiful skin from all the good lotions Juan will buy [her] in America” (21). Moreover, right before the wedding, Ana thinks that in New York she will have “a closet full of dresses and jewelry,” all kinds of “purses and shoes” (32). She also thinks about all the other girls in the area of Los Guayacanes, who “all hope for a proper proposal to get to a place where even country girls like us become glamorous and rich” (37). Kathryn Hume argues that the idea of the American Dream is closely “associated with immigrants’ hopes” (9), it expresses many “longings and desires” (3), and one of the core values that comprise it is prosperity or “material comfort” (3, 4). People have also hoped to enjoy “a classless society” (3), and to young immigrants, America is “the land of the pop culture they adore, a land of leisure, jeans, athletic shoes,” a place that can seem like “the land of romantic quest or fairytale reward” (4). Ana’s thoughts express her deep desire for
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prosperity and upward social mobility, and in her youthful innocence, she does seem to perceive America as a mythic land, where her dreams will come true. In this way, Cruz illustrates how the imaginary surrounding the myth of the American Dream is exported even through the stories of immigrants like Juan, and consumed in the Dominican Republic by people of the lower classes, who are looking desperately for ways to improve their lives.

The appeal of the American Dream is so overpowering mainly because of poverty, but also due to lack of opportunities, and harsh forms of discrimination in the space of the Dominican Republic instigated by white upper-class Dominicans. All these factors position Ana and her family in an outsider’s position in their own country. Cruz underscores the issue of lack of opportunities on the island as one of the driving forces behind Ana’s acceptance to marry Juan and to immigrate. When Ana shows her unwillingness to marry Juan, her mother “points at some barefooted boys carrying baskets of bags filled with peanuts and peeled oranges,” and asks her: “Do you know what your brother Yohnny is doing every day while you and Lenny spend your mornings at school?” (*Dominicana* 26). Thus, Ana starts wondering: “What kind of future waits for me or my brothers if I stay?” (26). In addition, Cruz draws attention to the issue of discrimination against rural working-class Dominicans, as Ana recalls an incident from when she worked as a maid for a family in San Pedro, where she had to stay in the service room “in the back of the house” (29). Ana remembers how her employers had asked her not to use the toilet in the main house, and assigned her her own dishes and glasses, explaining to their children how “countrywomen carry illnesses because [they] live with [their] animals” (29). Ana’s work as a maid “within” the space of an affluent household strongly suggests her “outsider-within” social location as described by Collins (11). Ana’s mistreatment rather echoes Gladys and the other maids’ experiences that worked for the Garcías, but Cruz centers the marginalized voice and point of view. Hume claims that the idea that “all men are held to be created equal in the Declaration of Independence has
encouraged those who have suffered from cultural and racial scorn to hope that they, too, could make good” in the U.S. (3-4). Thus, discrimination and lack of opportunities are two parameters that contribute to Ana’s immigration, as she realizes that she does not have a future in her own country. In this way, Cruz foregrounds the complex issue of the marginalization of the rural working class in the Dominican Republic, which positions Ana as an outsider in her own country, before even immigrating.

This marriage that Ana is practically coerced and manipulated into accepting does not benefit her, and it is not the solution to the problem of poverty as her mother expected. On the contrary, Juan’s decision to give Ana a fake passport, and to make her enter the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant, functions as an additional obstacle on top of Ana’s poverty that aggravates her already difficult situation. What is more, Ana’s fake passport symbolizes her “outsider-within” status in the U.S. When Ana sees her fake passport, she thinks to herself: “The woman in the photograph is an older version of me: Ana Ruiz-Canción born 25 December 1946” (Dominicana 42). Later on, Ana concludes: “In less than an hour, I’ve lost four years of my life. Ana Canción was fifteen. Ana Ruiz is nineteen” (43). Ana’s thoughts also betray a sense of loss of identity, or a new identity based on a lie she did not choose. In addition, Ana and Juan are to arrive to New York City on the 1st of January 1965, “early early so the officers will be too tired to notice that [she is] not the girl in the photo” (42). Ana’s older sister Teresa would call this choice “bad luck,” because to travel on the first day of the year is “like entering a room without going through a door” (42). Evidently, this is another spatial metaphor, which denotes marginal position or spatial exclusion from the U.S., even as Ana enters the country. Luis Ricardo Fraga et al.’s research concludes that one of the most important barriers to achieving the American Dream for Latina/o/x immigrants is lack of “legal status,” either “lack of citizenship or lack of documentation” (37). Therefore even though Ana’s light skin and green eyes are the features that function as her “winning lottery
ticket,” because they make her a desirable bride, and by extension allow her to immigrate to the U.S., eventually her poverty and her undocumented status are the factors that position her in a marginal “outsider-within” social location as regards her entry in the U.S. What is more, Ana’s undocumented status will eventually hinder her pursuit of the American Dream, because it limits her access to job opportunities that potentially could lead to upward social mobility. Thus, Ana enters the U.S. as an outsider from the very beginning.

2.2 Spatial Confinement as Exclusion from the American Dream

When Ana arrives in New York City, the Dominican Republic’s tropical heat and spatial exclusion are replaced by a prevailing cold, and spatial confinement in the domestic sphere of a rented, small, sixth floor apartment in Washington Heights. This spatial confinement, which is imposed by Juan’s strict patriarchal rules, marks Ana’s “outsider-within” position, because it entails exclusion from the public sphere, and the mainstream white Anglo culture, as well as the restriction of the pursuit of her American Dream, whilst living in America. On the first day Ana arrives in New York, Juan shows her around the apartment (*Dominicana* 55), then he “jiggles his keys,” he instructs her to not open the door for anyone, nor leave the apartment, and then he leaves with his brother, César (56, 57). At some point, many days later, Ana confesses: “I have not yet left the apartment by myself. Always with César or Juan. Most days I don’t leave the apartment at all. Between César and Juan, who come and go, from one job to the next, the wash has to be done every other day. The bathroom scrubbed. Meals made” (79). Then Ana adds: “Besides, I don’t even have my own key. Juan says he hasn’t had time to make a copy. Always an excuse” (79). Thus, Ana is symbolically imprisoned in the domestic sphere, in which Juan reproduces strict traditional gender roles. According to Doreen Massey, the “limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of
subordination” (*Space, Place, and Gender* 179). This “joint control of spatiality and identity has been in the West related to the culturally specific distinction between public and private,” and the “attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (179). Consequently, Ana’s domestic confinement marks her as an outsider, because it equates to exclusion from the public sphere and, by extension, to exclusion from the pursuit of her American Dream, which is perhaps further symbolized by the fact that she does not even have her own key. As a result, it is evident that as soon as Ana arrives in New York, her hope to live the American Dream fades into a bleak reality.

Furthermore, the fact that the promise of a better life, as it was sold to Ana, turns out to be a fable that contradicts reality, is evident in Ana’s spatial description of Juan’s apartment, and also by the fact that she spends her days cleaning and cooking. As soon as Ana arrives, Juan leaves her alone in the apartment, thus signaling the position and role she is expected to fulfill. Ana has to start cleaning and cooking from the very first day, because the apartment is “a sad mess” (*Dominicana* 57). It smells bad, “like something dead,” a “thin film of grease” covers the stove and the walls surrounding it, the large porcelain sink is “yellowed and full of dishes,” only one person can enter the narrow kitchen at a time, and there are unmade bare mattresses in lieu of beds (55). Moreover, the scene of the first day of Ana’s arrival in New York functions almost as an ironic reversal of César’s greeting, as he says to Ana, “[w]elcome to America,” and then hands her a chicken, which she is going to have to kill, pluck and cook, in the same way that she used to do in the Dominican Republic (56). In time, Ana’s domestic work transforms the apartment, as César admits that before she moved in, they had mice, and then he adds: “you keep everything so nice, just like your mother said you would” (97). Sara Ahmed et al. rightfully point out that “much work goes into the making of homes,” and the “labour of re-producing them is often designated as ‘women’s
work,” thus women’s negotiations of such “genderings of space and labour become part of the story of home and migration” (5). Avtar Brah emphasizes that within the structures of social relations “we do not exist simply as women but as differentiated categories, such as ‘working-class women’, ‘peasant women’ or ‘migrant women,’” and each of these descriptions references a specificity of social condition (102). Ana’s immigrant experience is defined by her rural working-class background, and by her confinement in the domestic sphere, where she is expected to do all the housework, and to recreate a Dominican home for Juan and César, instead of pursuing her own dreams and aspirations.

Aside from the domestic sphere, Ana’s mobility during the first months is also restricted by the same set of Juan’s patriarchal rules when it comes to navigating the space of her New York neighborhood, Washington Heights. This is evident when Ana narrates that Juan gives her a tour of the neighborhood, “in the same way he showed [her] around the apartment” (Dominicana 59). Moreover, Juan both gives a description of the cultural wealth and diversity of the neighborhood, but also expresses his racism as he says to Ana: “This is the Audubon Ballroom, where the Jews pray, the blacks make trouble, and we can watch movies in Spanish and go dancing” (59). Furthermore, Juan shows Ana “La Bodeguita,” the small convenience store downstairs under their building, where “[l]oud merengue spreads out,” and where he introduces Ana to Alex, the Puerto Rican owner, while grabbing her shoulders (60). In the store Juan pushes Ana aside and whispers in her ear even more rules, as he dictates what they should and should not buy (60-61). At the register, “Juan grunts at each item as if the adding of numbers causes him pain” (61). When they leave, Juan says: “I don’t

20 As Marina Todeschini points out, it is important to note that Juan does not consider himself black (110), both because he is white-presenting, but also due to the long-lasting effects of Trujillo’s racist regime. Juan rather self-identifies as Dominican, and he is racist towards African Americans. Torres-Saillant and Hernández emphasize: “The fact that Dominican independence [. . .] occurred as a separation from the black republic of Haiti, and that racial self-differentiation has subsequently been used in nationalist discourse, has added levels of complexity to the racial identity of Dominicans, including in the population a reticence to affirm their own blackness openly” (4). Olga Marina Segura states that Cruz is not afraid to “highlight the anti-Blackness and colorism prevalent within the Dominican community.” Cruz herself asserts: “For years, Dominicans were not even willing to acknowledge that they are Black citizens” (qtd. in Segura).
want you to go into La Bodeguita without me. You don’t know Alex. He’s only trouble” (61). Then Juan even warns Ana: “Be careful, Ana. I have eyes everywhere, you understand me?” (61). According to Brendan Krisel, Washington Heights has been officially designated the world’s first “Little Dominican Republic,” as it is a predominately Dominican neighborhood. However, in an interview with Courtney Collins, Cruz points out that in 1965, Washington Heights was a “predominantly Jewish, African American, Puerto Rican and Cuban” neighborhood. Thus, Ana, in contrast to the upper-class Garcías, resides in a racially and ethnically diverse working-class neighborhood, and she rarely navigates predominantly white spaces. In addition, in view of the material conditions described above, and due to the fact that Ana needs Juan’s permission to go to the convenience store, it is clear that for Ana, as a young, female, undocumented immigrant, America at this point does not represent prosperity nor freedom, but an experience of spatial confinement.

Washington Heights is the only public space Ana is allowed to navigate alone in New York City, before Juan leaves for the Dominican Republic. But even when she is alone outside of the apartment, on top of having to follow Juan’s rules, Ana also encounters obstacles due to her undocumented status and the fact that she does not speak English. All these obstacles indicate her confinement in her neighborhood. When Ana is finally able to go outside alone for the first time, it is because Juan asks her to do some errands (Dominicana 79). At the post office Ana says that “[e]verything is in English,” and the cashier “talks as if her mouth is full,” so Ana nods, not knowing what she is agreeing to (79). When Ana sees a police car parked in the middle of the block, and an officer writing up a ticket, she turns back on St. Nicholas and loses her way, because Juan warned her to not “look the police officers [. . . ] in the eye” (80), due to the ever-present threat of deportation. Ana’s thoughts betray her

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21 When Ana is walking outside, she also reveals the contrast between the myth of the American Dream that was sold to her and the reality that she is actually living, as she says: “I wear the wool dress from the bag full of used clothing given to Juan. I don’t yet own a wallet or purse, so I fold the five dollars and put it in my coat pocket” (79). Later on, on a different occasion, Ana also says: “I own one pair of used heels from a neighbor whose daughter recently passed away” (120).
anxiety and a sense of feeling lost and confused: “Nothing looks familiar. [. . .] The ground beneath me spins. The faces of strangers enlarge. Juan’s waiting, he’ll be late to work. A car slows down and rolls down his window. Words come out of a man’s mouth. I run” (80).

According to Fraga et al.’s research, two of the most important barriers to achieving the American Dream for Latina/o/x immigrants are “limited English proficiency,” and “lack of documentation” (37). Ana’s experience in the U.S. is defined by these two factors that mark her as an outsider even in the limited exploration of her New York neighborhood.

Another important factor in relation to Ana’s spatial confinement and outsider status, which obstructs her pursuit of the American Dream, is the domestic violence and repeated incidents of marital and statutory rape she endures at the hands of Juan. These are extreme forms of patriarchal oppression that intersect with class and race. During her marriage to Juan, Ana is forced to grow up too fast, and instead of being a girl in school, pursuing her own goals, she ends up losing her innocence, her freedom and fundamental human rights. Ana is presented as an entrapped, unwilling Persephone figure. This is foreshadowed in the first chapter, in which Ana is eleven years old and expresses her sorrow and unwillingness to marry Juan as she says: “I know then that one day the earth will rip open underneath my feet and Juan will take me away” (Dominicana 5). Later on, on their wedding night, Juan rapes Ana for the first time at an expensive hotel, right before immigrating (45-48), another act that suggests Ana’s Persephone-like loss of innocence and freedom. Then, in New York, various episodes of domestic violence take place, but the first and second incidents occur right after Ana opens the door to one of their neighbors because he has mail for Juan (69), and then to the building’s supervisor (93-95). The first episode of domestic violence occurs when Ana shows Juan the letters, and he slaps her for disobeying him because she opened the door, as he says: “That’s so you remember, when I say not to do something, you have to respect it” (69). On top of this, Ana is also subjected to recurring marital rapes, and as a result she gets
pregnant (89, 90). Crenshaw argues that “the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (“Mapping the Margins” 1242). Thus, Ana’s subjection to domestic violence is the outcome of intersecting forms of gender, class, and race oppression that restrict her self-determination.

Another important factor that hinders Ana’s pursuit of the American Dream and indicates her outsider status is the isolation she experiences in her confinement. Ana’s lack of a support system and sense of belonging result both from not being part of a community, but also from family separation. This is evident given that Ana spends her free time alone in the apartment looking out the window. According to Gillian Beer, the window as a symbol can express “the absolute exclusion of the observer,” and the denial of participation (8, 10). Ana even witnesses through her window the commotion resulting from Malcolm X’s assassination at the Audubon Ballroom, which in the novel is right across the street from her apartment (Dominicana 76-78). However, Ana does not actually understand the impact of this man’s role in history as one of the leaders of the Civil Rights movement fighting for justice and equality. Even though Ana learns from the TV news that Malcolm X is someone important and she seems to be fond of him (78), later on she wonders: “Why had this X man been so loved?” (155). Thus, Cruz’s depiction of Ana’s isolation that includes the recurring image of her looking out the window, further suggests her outsider status, as an observer of New York City’s life and history, who is relegated to the margins. Ana also spends her time feeding five pigeons that keep her company, and visit her regularly, which she names after her two brothers, her sister, and two cousins: “Yohnny, Juanita, Betty, Teresa, and Lenny” (74) This is another indication of Ana’s isolation and of how much she misses her siblings. After all the abuse she has endured, Ana even contemplates suicide momentarily by leaping “out the window” (95). Ana’s isolation, which is in part a consequence of not having her family with her in New York, is an element that often accompanies the immigrant experience of the
underprivileged and working-class people, and entails a lack of support as regards the pursuit of her personal goals and aspirations.

Despite her confinement in the domestic sphere for the first half of the narrative, after some time, Ana shows through her hard work her strong desire to pursue her own American Dream, even if it means working from home. However, it turns out that working hard is not enough to change her circumstances, in spite of her best efforts. An important aspect of the American Dream is demonstrating an entrepreneurial spirit, given that working hard and starting your own business is associated with the narrative of the “self-made” immigrant, and the “from rags to riches” stories of success. This notion could be connected to Ana’s various attempts to make her own money through her own hard work, and to her introduction to the idea of the “side hustle.” César, who is a tailor and works in “a dress factory” in the Garment District (Dominicana 171), teaches Ana how to sew (67, 68), because as he says: “in New York everyone needs a side hustle to survive. You can’t just wait until someone finds you a job, you gotta have skills and get that cash” (68). Thus, with her newly-acquired skills Ana starts working as a seamstress. She hems and shortens pants (85, 86), while “running Juan’s business at home,” given that he has “lots of customers” (87), but he is busy working at the Yonkers Raceway (84). Ana enjoys working and she upgrades the business as she says: “Juan used to keep the suits all over the living room in piles, bursting out of boxes. [. . . ] But I organized them in the closet the same way they do in the stores” (85). However, in spite of her hard work, Juan does not pay Ana (87). On top of that, Ana also has to deal with the male clients’ sexism, as she narrates that one man once “yanked the suit from [her] hand, folded it over his arm, and threw the money at [her] feet, paying only what he thought was the right price” (86). As a result, Ana starts saving secretly what little

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22 It is important to note that Ana is in love with César, and eventually she has an affair with him. Cruz asserts that this affair is one of Ana’s central acts of resistance (Interview with Vinson). Ana resists Juan’s patriarchal oppression by reclaiming her desire. What is more, César is the one who introduces Ana to both of her “side hustles,” first as a seamstress, and later on, as a street food vendor, thus encouraging her to pursue her own American Dream.
money she makes from sewing inside her ceramic Dominicana doll on the windowsill (86, 87), which functions as her secret stash. The doll clearly stands as a symbol of Ana’s dreams and aspirations, and in the end Juan shatters it into pieces (315). Cruz asserts that to some extent all her books “deal with informal economies that are born from the need to have a side hustle, especially when many jobs for the struggling class are below a living wage,” which means that “[f]or many keeping one’s head above water requires inventing ways to make money” (Interview with Vinson). According to Kathryn Hume, “[p]rosperity for anyone willing to work hard is a crucial component of the Dream” (3). Moreover, William A. V. Clark asserts that “two elements that are threaded through the American Dream,” are “a belief that there is a fair chance of succeeding and ample opportunities to do so,” thus, “[e]veryone has a chance, the opportunities are there, and hard work will be rewarded” (4).

Ana’s version of the American Dream is revised after a while, as her various efforts to make her own money indicate her desire for opportunity and independence, instead of a belief that Juan will provide material comfort. However, no matter how hard Ana works, her financial situation does not change, and she remains an outsider excluded from the promise of prosperity.

Another important obstacle suggested through Ana’s spatial confinement is her lack of access to education, which is considered fundamental in the pursuit of the American Dream. Ana, who loves numbers and used to be a good student in the Dominican Republic (Dominicana 16), but she was forced by her mother to drop out of school in order to marry Juan and immigrate (22), is yearning to go back to school in the U.S., and to learn English throughout the story. Ana understands the value of education as she narrates: “Education is the key to becoming independent and making something of myself” (188). However, Juan seems to be the one making all the decisions for her, and he hinders her development. When Ana first arrives in New York, she asks Juan: “Is that the school I’ll attend?” (60). Juan
responds: “No. In September, you’ll go to a secretarial school so you can learn how to type. And then you’ll work at my friend’s agency. Don’t you worry, everything’s been decided” (60). Then Juan also says that he is planning to buy a Buick to start the “Ruiz Taxi service” with his brothers, and that Ana is going to be the operator for their taxi business (65). In the meantime, when Ana’s mother calls, she asks her if she has started school yet, and whether she has learned English, as was the plan (87). Even though Ana really wants all of these things, she responds twice: “It’s not that easy” (87). As aforementioned, according to Fraga et al.’s research, for Latina/o/x immigrants quality education is seen as an integral part of the dream (35). What is more, without formal education, “a young person may be destined to a life of low pay and unstable employment with little chance of meaningful upward mobility” (58). Consequently, unlike the García girls who have access to elite institutions of education, for Ana getting an education is not that easy. This is because Ana does not have her parents’ support in the U.S., and on top of that she has to perform all the domestic labor, run Juan’s suit business at home, work as a seamstress in order to make some money, and tolerate all his rules and restrictions. Hence, spatial confinement also entails lack of access to education, which further suggests Ana’s outsider status and exclusion from upward social mobility.

2.3 Navigating Public Space in New York City as an “Outsider-Within” or “‘World’-Traveling”

Only when Juan leaves in order to protect his property and to secure a title for his land during the 1965 Dominican Civil War and the U.S. occupation, does Ana find some sense of freedom, and she explores New York City for the first time. But Ana’s freedom is still restricted by the two fundamental obstacles that indicate her “outsider-within” social

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23 It is important to note that Cruz refers to the 1965 U.S. invasion in the Dominican Republic. Thus, perhaps Cruz highlights even more the paradox between Ana’s socioeconomic exclusion in the U.S., and America’s abuse of power in Ana’s country for its own interests. For instance, Ana narrates that the “Dominican Republic is at war” (Dominicana 158), and that “the Americans have occupied Santo Domingo, siding with the military to prevent another Cuba” (165).
location: the fact that she does not speak English, and her undocumented status. As aforementioned, Ana experiences various instances of miscommunication due to the language barrier, which represents one of the most important obstacles that she has to overcome. Furthermore, Ana is informed that in order to get a GED, she first has to learn English (Dominicana 116). Ana, who is determined to live the American Dream, understands the value of English-language acquisition and education, so when Juan leaves, the first thing she does is to attend the “free ESL lessons” at the rectory next to her neighborhood’s church (183). However, as soon as Ana is walking on the street, in order to attend the ESL lessons, she thinks to herself: “What if immigration grabs me and takes me away like they did the sister of Giselle from El Basement” (183). Todeschini argues that during Juan’s absence, “Ana discovers the city as a flâneuse” (103), and that “she has the autonomy and the freedom of any white male flâneur previously portrayed in literature” (110). However, according to Lugones, it is “only men of a certain class and race who are in a position to exercise their mobility without restriction” (Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes 17). This is evident in Ana’s narrative, who is burdened repeatedly by her undocumented status and later on by the weight of her growing belly. Lugones proposes that as “outsiders to the mainstream, women of color in the United States” necessarily acquire flexibility, which allows them to practice what she calls “‘world’-traveling” (77). “‘World’-traveling” is the traveling across “worlds” (78), or the experience of shifting from the mainstream construction of life, where women of color

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24 General Educational Development certificate.
25 The flâneur is an urban figure that typically strolls in a leisurely manner and observes the cityscape. According to Todeschini, the “flâneur is usually a literary character associated with a specific social class, gender, and race: he is a middle-class white male, often intellectual, that strolls around city spaces narrating his journey. This male urban character, first found in European texts from the nineteenth century, has the right to access all city areas. He meanders without a specific goal or destination, he is not rushed to get to work and is not restricted by segregation, signs that confirm his social class and privileges. In this sense, he represents the upper-class white gaze of our metropolis and for a long time, the only one found in literature” (27). Moreover, while the origins of the term “flâneur” are traced to the “development of urbanism in Paris and to the poet Charles Baudelaire in the 1850s,” it was “first theorized by Walter Benjamin (1969), when interpreting Charles Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal, 1857 (Dreyer and McDowall, 2012), as the base for flâneur theory” (27). Etymologically, the noun “flâneur” stems from the French verb flâner, meaning “to saunter or lounge” (27).
are constructed as outsiders, to other constructions of life, where they are "more or less ‘at home’" (77). It refers to the flexibility required in navigating mainstream spaces as an outsider. Ana’s navigation of public space in the postmodern city of New York is one in which she rather transforms *flânerie* into an act of resistance and "‘world’-traveling,” as an outsider in a mainstream space. Cruz states that for Ana learning English is an act of resistance (Interview with Vinson). Ana’s navigation of public space in New York City is also an act of resistance to her exclusion enacted from her precarious "outsider-within” position, given that even her ESL lessons are encumbered by her undocumented status. Therefore, Cruz simultaneously implies Ana’s deep desire and hope for a better future, as she takes a step forward, but also her outsider’s position, as she is always faced with the ubiquitous threat of deportation. Thus, Ana is both excluded and at the same time resisting this exclusion.

One rare instance in which Ana is depicted navigating a white space further suggests her "outsider-within” social location vis-à-vis the mainstream white culture, and her exploration of New York City as a "‘world’-traveler.” This incident takes place at Woolworth and it implies Ana’s symbolic exclusion from the American Dream, even when she finally starts exploring the marvels of New York City. Unlike the García girls, whose mother Laura takes them with her to “department stores to see the wonders of this new country” (*García Girls* 133), without any problem whatsoever, Ana faces discrimination in a similar situation. Ana goes into Woolworth to “study all the bottles of lotions and hair products,” to write down the names and the ingredients, so she can later look up the translations, and practice her English (*Dominicana* 191). When she is there, Ana wants to “join the people sitting at the counter,” because the smell of pancakes, hot dogs, and sweet syrup is so tempting, but then she realizes that she cannot be there, because as she says: “the man behind the counter looks at me as if he doesn’t want me there” (191). Then Ana concludes: “So much of the city
belongs to other people. Not wanting trouble, I leave” (191). This scene probably alludes to the Civil Rights movement sit-in protest against racial segregation at Woolworth’s lunch counter that took place in Greensboro N.C. in 1960 (Sascha Cohen). However, for Ana sitting at the counter even as a form of protest is not an option, because being an undocumented immigrant means that she is always afraid of deportation. In this scene that strongly suggests spatial exclusion and outsider status, Ana probably encounters a racist hostile environment, because even though she is a light-skinned mixed-race girl, perhaps she is not deemed “white enough” to be in this white space in the 1960s, due to America’s “one-drop” rule. In this way, Cruz suggests both Ana’s profound longing to become part of the city and have the proverbial “seat at the table,” or in this case the counter, but also symbolically her exclusion from the promise of prosperity of the American Dream, due to both her undocumented status and racial discrimination.

As aforementioned, Ana’s most important obstacle, which marks her as an outsider in New York, is her undocumented status. This means that she has to be very cautious when she navigates public space, and to avoid attracting the police’s attention. However, Ana exercises her agency within the city space even as an outsider. This is evident when Ana embarks on her most important side hustle as a street food vendor, which entails precisely navigating public space. Through this business venture, which is another act of resistance to exclusion, Cruz highlights how difficult it is for Ana to make her own money, in spite of her hard work and determination. César comes up with the idea of selling Ana’s pastelitos at the World’s Fair, because he believes that they are “going to be rich” (Dominicana 209). Consequently, César buys two tickets for four dollars (209), and invests ten dollars on ingredients, which is enough to make “three hundred pastelitos,” and he says that if they sell them all, they will make “seventy-five dollars” (211). Ana hesitates because of her

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26 According to Williams, unlike the Spanish Caribbean, where a complicated “color-continuum model of racial classification” still remains even today (23-24), in the United States the “one-drop” rule continues to define a person as black, if they have “one drop” of blood from an African ancestor (11, 12).
undocumented status, but she eventually goes along with it, and they “wake up at four in the morning to fry pastelitos to sell at the fair” (211). Ana is “almost six months pregnant,” and she is “already getting tired,” by the time they get to the fair (213). Ana is forced to smile for hours (215), in order to sell pastelitos including to racist customers, who call them “thieves” (214), until she says that she cannot take it anymore, and bursts into tears (217). Out of the “seventy-five dollars” César expected to make, he says that after working so hard all day long, they have only made “thirty-six dollars and fifty cents minus the fourteen dollars spent so far” (217). After failing to sell all the pastelitos, Ana and César leave exhausted, and given that Ana cannot even walk to the train, they take a taxi and spend some more of what they have made, but Ana feels joy “like a part of the future” (217, 218). Thus, even though they make far less than they expected, Ana remains hopeful. Cruz states that Ana’s effort “[t]o make some money” is another act of resistance, it is about “reclaiming power and space, even if momentarily” (Interview with Vinson). According to the author Helena María Viramontes, Dominicana is “a searing first-hand account of a Dominican woman who is not only imprisoned in the patriarchy of culture but also in the inequality of the capitalist U.S. in the 1960s” (qtd. in González). Consequently, Ana’s struggle to make some money when she can finally navigate public space, indicates both how difficult it is to escape her working-class position, but also her resourcefulness, her desire for freedom and opportunity, as well as her willingness to occupy her own space in New York City, even as an outsider.

In the final scene, Ana is walking through her neighborhood streets accompanied by her mother and younger brother, while pushing her daughter’s stroller. After separating from Juan, Ana feels more acclimated to life in New York. She is determined to stay, given that as she mentions earlier, after the birth of her daughter, Altagracia, she will be able to “apply for permanent residence” (Dominicana 202). Ana narrates that her mother “will work at a lamp factory across the bridge in New Jersey,” and “when the baby qualifies for daycare, [Ana]
will join her” (290). In addition, Ana admits that her mother and brother sleep in the bedroom with her, and Juan now sleeps on the sofa, because they have “no choice,” until they “make enough money to cover the rent” themselves (318). Nevertheless, in spite of this precarious reality, Ana expresses deep hope about her future, as she says to her mother: “soon I’m going to go to school and study accounting so I know how to manage all our business” (318). Then Ana asserts: “I know one day I will no longer live with Juan. [. . .] And we are going to work hard. Especially Altagracia, who will make something special out of herself” (319). Thus, through Ana’s story, Cruz does not offer a “from rags to riches” narrative of a “self-made” immigrant, but rather she illustrates the difficult journey of a young working-class woman of color, who struggles for a better life. Even though Ana resists the parameters of her exclusion, no matter how hard she works in her entrepreneurial efforts, she never seems to be able to change her socioeconomic condition, due to all the obstacles resulting from gender, race, and class oppression that position her as an outsider. Ana’s exclusion from upward social mobility is not resolved, but the final scene suggests that eventually she does claim her own space in New York City, she is eager to get an education, and important changes are underway both in the domestic and the public sphere. More specifically, Ana starts to exercise her agency by separating Juan, she finally has her mother’s support, and she is no longer alone. Furthermore, given that her daughter is an American citizen, and Ana is eligible to apply for permanent residence, she will finally be able to navigate public space without fear of deportation. All these important changes renew Ana’s hope for a better future both for herself and for her daughter, even if she does not attain prosperity.
CONCLUSION

In the course of this research, I examined two novels that form part of the Latina and Latina Caribbean literary production for which there is an increasing interest. This thesis has demonstrated that Alvarez’s and Cruz’s respective novels represent two diverging Dominican-American female migrant narratives and standpoints, due to class and race differences. This project engages through an intersectional approach in an analytical examination of the differences created by the divisions of class and race that have historically characterized the Latina/o/x community, in order to investigate how these differences affect the immigrant experience. I have argued that the characters’ access to or exclusion from specific spatial contexts suggest their access to or exclusion from the American Dream. Alvarez’s novel the *García Girls* presents the female upper-class Dominican-American immigrant experience. Even though the García girls face discrimination and feel a sense of “in-betweenness,” as white affluent characters they do have access to privileged spaces in the U.S., spaces that suggest their access to the American Dream. Cruz’s novel *Dominicana* presents the female Dominican-American immigrant experience through Ana Canción’s character as a mixed-race working-class girl. Ana is an outsider both in the Dominican Republic and the U.S. I have argued that Ana’s spatial confinement and exclusion suggest exclusion from the American Dream, due to obstacles resulting from intersecting forms of gender, class, and race oppression. Even though Ana performs acts of resistance, in the end, her exclusion from upward social mobility is not resolved, but in spite of her precarious reality she keeps hoping for a better future.

The Garcías’ access to privileged spaces that suggests access to the American Dream is implied even before immigrating, through the family compound’s proximity to the American Embassy, the family’s connections with U.S. government officials, and the protection provided by the CIA. Carlos’ collaboration with a CIA agent allows the family to
enter the U.S. as legal political exiles. The constant mention of American expensive gifts, while still living in the Dominican Republic, suggests the girls’ early access to American culture. Most importantly, in the U.S., space functions again as a central structuring metaphor, which suggests both “in-betweenness,” but also access to the American Dream. The Garcías’ access to the American Dream is signaled first by the home they buy in a predominantly white middle-class suburban neighborhood, a spatial symbol of the American Dream itself. Carlos becomes an American citizen and his professional success as a doctor safeguards the family’s prosperity in the U.S. The García girls’ access to a prestigious preparatory school, and later on, to colleges, where they acquire academic degrees and become professionals, also suggests access to the American Dream. Above all, Yolanda’s career as a successful Latina writer in English indicates that the greatest expression of her “in-betweenness” is her storytelling, which leads her to live her own American Dream. In the end, even though the García girls experience at times a sense of alienation, due to the fact that their “in-betweenness” is sometimes filled with conflict, ultimately they attain all the basic components of the American Dream: prosperity, freedom, and opportunity.

Ana Canción’s spatial confinement and exclusion suggest exclusion from the American Dream, due to overlapping forms of gender, class, and race oppression, which is implied even before immigrating. Cruz indicates Ana’s outsider status even in her own country by positioning her primarily outside in the yard of her parent’s humble abode when she is still in the Dominican Republic. Ana’s outsider status is also signaled by the fact that she works as a maid and she is discriminated against in her own country, but also by the fact that her mother arranges a marriage while she is still underage in an attempt to escape poverty. Ana’s outsider status follows her to the U.S., and her fake passport symbolizes her “outsider-within” social location when she immigrates to the States as an undocumented immigrant. In New York, for the first half of the story, Ana is isolated and confined in the
space of Juan’s apartment in Washington Heights. She faces the difficulties resulting from the language barrier, given that she does not speak English, and her access to education is heavily restricted. Ana’s lack of access to education, along with the domestic violence she is subjected to, and an unplanned pregnancy, illustrate how patriarchal oppression creates insurmountable obstacles for her. All these obstacles make it practically impossible for Ana to escape her lower-class position, but after a while Ana starts performing acts of resistance to her exclusion. Ana starts saving her own money, and after Juan leaves, she enjoys some relative sense of freedom as she explores New York City and attends ESL lessons, even as her mobility is still restricted both by the threat of deportation, and by racism. Ana’s hard work both as a seamstress and as a street food vendor never amounts to the attainment of upward social mobility and prosperity. No matter how hard Ana is trying to escape her working-class position, her exclusion is never resolved, but in the end, Ana does become part of the city, and her hope for a better future is renewed.

Examining the heterogeneity of the Latina Caribbean immigrant experience in these two novels within an intersectional framework is important in order to unpack overlapping systems of oppression such as gender, class, and race that determine how individuals even within the same community navigate space differently. Conflating divergent identities in terms of race and class into one unifying category without recognizing differences runs the risk of erasure of complex realities. Moreover, recognizing that space at the micro and the macro level is inextricably intertwined with power, allows for a reading of space in both novels as a structuring metaphor that suggests access to or exclusion from the American Dream.

Finally, it is important to note that an understanding of Latin America’s history of colonialism is crucial in the analysis of Latina/o/x and Latina/o/x Caribbean works of literature in general, and Dominican-American novels in particular. This thesis serves as an
input for future research regarding the differences that exist within the Latino/a/x community, and a proposal to engage more critically in complex issues relating to the heterogeneity of the community and its racial and class divisions.
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