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Owen Helsens April 9, 2025

The Colors of Our Skin: Translation and Commentary of *Color de piel*

by

Owen Helsens

Lisa Dillman
Adviser

Spanish

Lisa Dillman

Adviser

Leonardo Velloso-Lyons

Committee Member

Angela Porcarelli

Committee Member

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Abstract

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By Owen Helsens

This honors thesis explores the racial constructs of the Dominican Republic, resulting from a complex colonial history, Haiti's and The United States' occupation of the Dominican Republic, and Trujillo's dictatorship. These events are nuanced within Jeannette Miller's novel, *Color de piel*, my translation of which is the crux of this work. Miller juxtaposes racial hegemonic frameworks within the United States and the Dominican Republic, two settings of this novel. Via the translation of fifteen sections of this narrative, my thesis highlights how race is embodied through the characters of Miller's novel, showing the readers an internal struggle with race and identity that permeates Dominican society.

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Critical Introduction

Three Dominican women raised me; the strongest women I have ever met. They shaped me into the person I am today, instilling their Dominican culture within me. It was everywhere, from the food my abuela made to the way my mamá spoke, and to the stories my tía recounted. My home was infused with their profound passion for their culture, which was rich and complex. They shared with me tragic stories of Trujillo's dictatorship and the struggles with race, gender, and identity they experienced when immigrating to the United States. These deeply personal narratives were passed down to me, and they infuse this project. My perspective, intertwined with that of my family, deepened my understanding of this translation, nuancing the discourse of the intersectionality of race and gender, troubling the dichotomous racial constructs of the Dominican Republic and the United States. Jeannette Miller, the Dominican author whose novel *Color de piel* (The Colors of Our Skin) is the crux of my thesis, incorporates her lived narrative in her writing, heavily, noting social changes after Trujillo's dictatorship, and highlighting the socio-ethnic struggles of Dominican women.

Miller is seen as a pioneer of Dominican literature, born in the capital, Santo Domingo, in 1944. Her father was killed in 1959 as a victim of Trujillo's cruel regime, and is a motivating force in her writing, which focuses on social changes following Trujillo's assassination in 1961. These thematics centered on Trujillo's dictatorship is what unites her with the "generación poética de los 60", a group of writers and poets born between 1936 - 1945 who predominantly published work between 1966 - 1973 (Cole 138). Miller explores themes of racial and gender inequality—issues that remain prevalent in the Dominican Republic today—due to the complex mixture of the island's colonization history, U.S. involvement, and dictatorship.

These topics are frequently discussed in the Dominican Republic, which is exemplified in Miller's literature; however, many other Dominican writers focus on these themes as well. During the time frame Miller was writing, other literature followed the same topics, as the dictatorship had just fallen (1961) and these topics were now free to be explored. Writers such as Aída Cartagena Portalatín and Sherezada "Chiqui" Vicioso are trailblazers for Dominican women's literature, offering their perspectives on the intersectionality of sexuality, gender and race in the Dominican Republic.

Portalatín (1918-1994) is considered to be the greatest Dominican woman writer of the 20th century, and one of the most prolific authors of her time (Duke 564). Her poetry examines the identities of Dominican women and the challenges they confront, highlighting their right to occupy a more prevalent role in the family, society, and the world. Through her work, she showcases a world void of hegemonic gender narratives, reimagining women as the center of society. Bankay states that "[She] paved the way for the emergence and indeed the development of the type of poetry not being produced by women in the Dominican Republic—poetry, which is frank and honest, poetry which is not bound by traditional norms…" (35). Her writing, specifically her writing post-Trujillo, confronts concepts of race that had yet to be discussed in Dominican narrative (35). These topics, infused with cultural heritage and gender, were omitted from Dominican literature during Trujillo's dictatorship, an era that glorified Eurocentrism. Portalín's writing shatters this framework, with a focus on cultural ties to the indigenous and African people, prevalent in Yania *Tierra*, flaunting a hybrid structure that provides a link to pre-Colombian Taíno systems of writing, drawing and painting (Williams).

Additionally, Chiqui, born in 1948, is considered to be a large contributor to contemporary Dominican writing (Ronderos). Vicioso is an Afro-Dominican woman who

dedicates her work to make the issue of race in the Dominican Republic clear, specifically focusing on the rejection of Blackness and the country's African roots, which can be seen in her poem "Bissau". She further addresses the problem of race, as seen through the manifestation of animosity between the Haitian and Dominican people (Bankay 36).

The present-day hostility between these countries stemmed from two major events in Dominican history: the Haitian occupation of Santo Domingo from 1822-1844, and the Parsley Massacre in 1937 (Cadeau). An anti-Hatian sentiment further spread throughout the population, due to Haiti's occupation of the Dominican Republic, which turned for the worse roughly 100 years later when Trujillo ordered the massacre of 17,000 Haitians in an attempt to whiten the Dominican population. Trujillo introduced people of Caucasian, European, origin to the island, while simultaneously removing those with darker skin tones, specifically Black people; his prejudice fueled an anti-Black sentiment that ravaged the island (Fennema). Viciosa confronts this rejection of Blackness and how it appears in the hostility between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Similarly, Miller teases out the idea of Blackness in the Dominican Republic in her literary works; an example of this is her poem "Mi lengua". She describes how the concept of race in the Dominican Republic has been drastically impacted by anti-Haitian sentiments that sprouted from the Haitian occupation (1822). In her poem, Miller "...rechaza la retórica trujillana que apuntaba que todos los dominicanos eran descendientes de los españoles y criollos" (Cole 138). Miller denies the Eurocentric sentiments that Trujillo held and reinstilled on the island; rather, she utilizes her poem to highlight the contributions that African cultures have had on her homeland and how their influences appear in modern culture. Her literary platform is also used to discuss themes regarding gender, where she explores stereotypes of women and how they are

often forced to play a particular, imposed role in society. In her poem, "Mi casa," Miller describes a woman who feels deprived of her own freedom, trapped in her own home, a place symbolizing the traditional confinement of women. These narratives are also interwoven in Miller's novel *Color de piel*, where she addresses race and gender further in-depth, showing their intersection in Dominican society.

Color de piel, published in 2019, incorporates personal, political, and sociocultural aspects—the U.S. occupation, racial discourse, and the dictatorship—to produce a fictionalized account of Miller's life. The novel portrays the prioritization of whiteness during the U.S. domination of the Dominican Republic in political, economic, and cultural terms; this theme is best portrayed by the characters of Violeta and Peter Jacob. The narrative begins with the life of Violeta, a young, upper-class Dominican woman who is greatly affected by the U.S. occupation of her island (1916-1924). Violeta has many suitors, all of whom are Dominican men; however, when the U.S. soldiers come to subjugate the island, a white man becomes interested in her. Violeta's mother becomes enamored by the soldier, romanticizing his white features. She forces Violeta to pursue him and eventually is married off to the American soldier, Peter Jacob, against her will. He takes her back to Savannah, Georgia, where she is treated like a slave by her spouse's mother, June Rose. During her time there, Violeta is exposed to the cruelties of June Rose. Meanwhile Peter Jacob does not intervene; instead, he spends his time in bars becoming drunk off the presence of women. Watching the houses of Black people being burnt to the ground by the KKK, Violeta barely makes it out before she suffers the same fate from her mother-in-law, who has become involved within this organization of racial terror.

After escaping the anguish she felt in the United States, she returns to her island as a single mother. Violeta remarries a Dominican man who promises to care for her sons, Tedy and

Robert, children of Violeta and Peter Jacob. Tedy follows his father's footsteps, living a scandalous life chasing after women and alcohol, even abandoning his own children in the process. Isabelle, the fictionalized version of Miller, and her sisters are raised by Violeta and their great aunts, after their father, Tedy, abandoned them. After his death, Isabelle begins to share her personal narrative, which marks the shift from third person—the perspective of the majority of the novel—to first person. The narrative then follows Isabelle as she recounts her complex relationship with her absent father and grandfather. Her internal struggle of self-identification climaxes when she, herself, decides to visit Savannah, where she realizes that things have barely changed. After witnessing forms of racial discrimination, she becomes aware Savannah is the same; racism still runs rampant. She is compelled to visit Peter Jacob's grave but a force stops her from entering the cemetery, and, finally, she decides to leave. Isabelle feels calm—which Miller juxtaposes with a raging storm—as she remembers all of her family members and the bad luck she has experienced in her life. She finally reflects on her life, accepting the turmoil she has suffered. In time, Isabelle eventually comes to terms with her identity and her family history as she returns home to the Dominican Republic.

Importantly, the novel chronicles significant moments in the history of the Dominican Republic and the acceptance of its African roots through a deeply personal perspective. The narrative spans 100 years, from 1916 to 2016, a period which includes the heavy political intervention of the United States in the Dominican Republic and Trujillo's dictatorship. Miller organizes *Color de Piel* into five distinct parts: "Antes" ("Before"), "Después" ("After"), "Ahora" ("Now"), "Hoy" ("Today"), and "Hablando sola" ("Talking to Myself"). This structure, according to Russ, weaves together the novel's disparate elements into a cohesive narrative: "The sequenced structure of *Color de piel* helps organize chapters and sections that otherwise seem

disconnected… Within this frustrated narrative flow, Isabelle's familial history bristles with private and public value, as personal circumstances become inextricable from the struggles endured by the Dominican nation over the course of the century" (34). Isabelle's narrative, centered on her internal tension with her identity, is applicable to the Dominican people. Isabelle's character reflects Miller's life, while Miller reflects the life of the Dominican people. She uses her narrative to relate to her people, and through my translation, her narrative can be shared to a larger audience.

The sequencing of Miller's novel highlights both her ancestry and influential events in Dominican history. The longest section, "Antes," covers the first U.S. occupation (1916–1924) of the Dominican Republic and extends until 1960, the year preceding Trujillo's assassination. The months following the assassination until 1985 makeup "Después" section, followed by "Ahora," which spans from 2003 to 2016, abandoning the earlier sections' style. This section marks where Isabelle begins her own narrative, characterized by the shift from third to first person, through an introspective journey to accept her family history. The section titled "Hoy" contains one chapter that takes place in Savannah, Georgia, in 2016, which is used strategically by Miller to show that even after a century, issues of race and identity have not been resolved. Racism still exists in the South as it did when Violeta, Isabelle's grandmother, lived there. The section title that both opens and closes the novel "Hablando sola," unique to the previously listed sections, showcases the inner dialogue of Isabelle, the fictionalized version of Miller (Ross).

Miller juxtaposes the racial tension between Black and white in both the United States and the Dominican Republic by following the novel's characters in both Savannah and the Dominican Republic. The novel commences in Savannah, accentuating how a Black man is killed for his skin color. Miller stresses this tension within the first chapters in her novel,

highlighting the abrupt disparity between countries: “In the U.S. South, brown-skinned men are murdered in broad daylight, in front of their mothers, by angry white mobs. In the Dominican Republic, brown-skinned men and women comprise the elite: they sing opera, write poetry, and lead government and armies” (Russ 34). Explicitly, Miller places focus on the racial differences between the two countries; with the comparison between the first chapter, where a Black man in Savannah, Georgia is lynched, and the second chapter, where Miller introduces Violeta, one of the novel’s key characters. Violeta represents the dichotomy of her European elegance and a brown complexion, a symbol of the Dominican Republic’s mestizo heritage. A mixed ancestry consisted of the Spanish colonizers, the indigenous Taíno people, and the African people enslaved to work in plantations, which had made up roughly 90% of the population (Fennema). Moreover, Violeta’s mother, Adelita, embodies the illusion many Dominicans had, and still have, about white skin. She forces Violeta to marry a white man; due to her own prejudice, believing white skin to be a “gift from God”. This ideology was further instilled in the population through the glorification of the U.S. soldiers, whose white features were reminiscent of the Spanish colonizers. Many of the Dominincans, Violeta’s mother as an example, rejected their African roots and the dark history of slavery on the island. This rejection is highlighted in many Dominican's own racial identity.

> Ninguno de ellos quería que se le recordarán la época dolorosa de la esclavitud. Todos por tanto, querían deshacerse del “*negro,”* y de todas la connotaciones negativas con que llevaba. Si solo se pudiera redirigir la referencia indígena, del “***negro”*** al “***bronceado”***, podría resolverse la contradicción implícita en la formación de una nación hispana con una población de origen africano. Así la palabra “***indio***” llegó a usarse para designar al mulato, y hasta al negro (“***indio***

> ***oscuro***" o "***indio quemao***"), invocando un pasado indígena y romántico en vez del tribalismo africano y la esclavitud. (Fennema 28)

This rejection of Blackness is prevalent in *Color de piel* through Violeta's storyline, specifically through her mother, who has direct ancestral ties to the Spanish, white, colonizers.

Miller describes Violeta's mother as having white ancestry mixed with that of freed Black slaves. However, she idealizes Eurocentric features, gravitating towards the white soldiers during the occupation of her island. Miller uses physical traits to characterize Adeltia's rejection of her Black roots, specifically when describing her hair, which falls over her forehead. This imagery implies that Adelita has straight hair, which follows beauty trends of the island of taming curly hair—a Black trait. Although Violeta is sought after by many Dominican men, forms part of the upper echelons, and is interested in Apolinar, a Black Dominican journalist, her mother would rather her be with one of the white soldiers, believing they will care and provide for her better than any Dominican man could. White skin became a symbol of beauty, not only by Violeta's mother, but by a majority of the population. Miller highlights this through commentary on the population's division: those who hated the soldiers and those who adored them. This idealization of the U.S. soldiers comes to a climax when Violeta is forced to marry one of the soldiers, Peter Jacob. Her mother forces Violeta to comply with her demands, assuring her that in the United States, she would live a good life with that man. Violeta's mother, although knowing nothing of Peter Jacob, wanted her daughter to be with him because he is white, rather than be with an upper class man from her own country. This further concretizes how Eurocentric features clouded her judgment, leading Adelita to believe that he would be the best suitor for her daughter.

Through Violeta's perspective, when she moves to the U.S. South with Peter Jacob, Miller develops contrasts in racial power dynamics in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, both having systems of anti-Black racism, however each displayed in different ways and to different degrees. The Dominican Republic was a nucleus for slavery, with plantations riddling the island (early 1500s). When a plantation order is present, people uphold a logic that longs for a society in which people of color are subservient to whites. In order for this framework to function, there needs to be an erasure or a rejection of Blackness, which is present in many sectors of Dominican society (Russ 33). Miller explains this societal erasure of Blackness in the section "¡*Negros*, No!", "...todavía muchos sectores no los querían y eso se reflejaba en los empleos, en los anuncios, en los alquileres y ventas de properidades, en los desfiles de moda; nadie quería a un prieto cerca porque dañaba el ambiente" (181). These sectors pushed Black people into the peripheries, demanding whiteness to be seen as "superior" while Blackness is unwelcome. For the plantation logic to thrive, there must be an emphasis on whiteness with a rejection of Blackness, which allows for a racial hierarchy to be formed.

The first step to this erasure or rejection is how Dominicans are characterized by their collective national identity rather than their race, identifying as Dominican rather than the color of their skin (Fennema 52). The ideology of identifying as a population, Dominican, rather than by skin color pushes them farther away from Blackness, creating a system where colorism can thrive. Although colorism is present in the United States, the system set in place in the Dominican Republic functions on an erasure of Black identity, using skin-shade terminology to avoid classifying oneself through their race. It is common to be classified by your shade of skin, which Dominicans have a multitude of terminology to describe, while not being associated with a single race. Fennema explains: "Tercer hecho sorprendente: a pesar de que la '*raza*

dominicana' no tiene color, se define como opuesta a la *'raza negra',* en otras palabras, la '*raza dominicana'* (solamente) por implicación es no-negra" (52). The binary between Black and white is not clearly defined since the Dominican people are of "no-color", instead, they are defined by the shade of their skin. Miller incorporates this in her novel with descriptors such as "trigueña", "moreno", and "aceitunada", which all are used to characterize a character based on the color of their skin. The usage of this terminology further nourishes the logic of the plantation, as lighter skin shades are preferred over darker shades. Miller confirms this, explaining that the lighter one's skin, the more they discriminate against those of darker skin (181). The plantation logic, present in the racial hierarchy in the Dominican Republic, is also characterized in the novel through Peter Jacob and his family:

> The figure of Peter Jacob foregrounds whiteness as it circulates in the logic of the plantation, as do the early chapters set in his hometown that establish the U.S. south as a brutal bastion of anti-Black racism. U.S. categories and concepts of race are thus foundational, intersecting with and impinging upon Dominican experiences of racial and cultural identity that remain fundamentally distinct. (Russ 35)

Peter Jacob takes Violeta back to Savannah, Georgia (1919), where in the first chapter of the book, we see a Black man killed by a white mob (1916). During this time in the U.S. South, racial segregation was established. Unlike the Dominican Republic, in the U.S. there is a clear divide between white and Black that fuels anti-Black racism (Truesdale 100). Violeta is immediately subjected to this plantation order, forced to a life of servitude by June Rose, Peter Jacob's mother, regardless of the lighter, "trigueña", tone of her skin. Violeta is forced to do all of the house chores, while she is raising two children and coping with her drunkard husband. As

a nonwhite person, Violeta is forced to be subservient to her white, mother-in-law. This situation further escalates with June Rose's involvement in the KKK—where she uses a portrait of Violeta's father to prove she is indeed Black: "...luego [Violeta] supo que la mujer había llevado la foto a unas reuniones semanales de activistas racistas, para demostrar a los demás que ella era negra porque su padre era un mulato" (Miller 49).

Despite Violeta having a mixed father, of Galician and African descent, she is configured to be Black in the eyes of June Rose, enforcing the U.S. construct of race onto her. The framework of race during this time period (1910s-1920s), according to Truesdale, is reliant on the following: "'(1) human races are unequal, and will remain unequal to the end of history; (2) the Negro is far inferior to the Caucasion…'" (100). The deeply rooted anti-Black racism in the U.S. South is superimposed onto the character of Violeta, who is discriminated against by June Rose. Miller incorporates this within the novel through June Rose, on multiple occasions, demanding for Violeta to live in the Black neighborhood: "... la vieja le exigía que sacara a Violeta de la casa y que se fueran a vivir al barrio de los negros…" (59). June Rose demands that Violeta adhere to the racial constructs of the United States, categorizing her as a Black woman, which Miller teases out through descriptors used for Violeta in both countries. When she is first introduced in the book, Miller writes she is "trigueña", a descriptor describing a lighter shade of brown, similar to wheat. Whereas in the United States, June Rose, along with others living in Savannah, view Violeta as a Black woman.

June Rose treats Violeta as if she were subhuman, ingraining the logic of the plantation deep into Violeta, forcing her to obey her every command. Violeta lives to serve June Rose and her family, and although Gunter, June Rose's husband, pities Violeta, he does nothing to stop his wife's abuse of her. His role as a bystander reinforces that, although he does not necessarily

follow this plantation logic, he is still taking part, complicit by allowing Violeta to complete work for his family. Violeta is forced to wash clothing, clean the house, and cook, while remaining subservient to her husband's white family. Miller nuances this interaction of race and gender through the ideology of the plantation and traditionally feminine roles in the household. From a young age, girls are taught to cook, clean, and iron clothing They are expected to make men's lives easier, and are forcefully shoved into these social roles (Medina 19-20). This foregrounds how Violeta is expected to complete these inherently feminine tasks while being subjected to a hierarchical system in Savannah.

Violeta, witnessing June Rose privately conversing with members of the KKK, is filled with dread. These men lurk around her house and stalk her and her children, incentivising her to flee the country. Once she returns to her island, she is finally free from Peter Jacob and his family's abuse, however, his presence still looms over her. The physical and mental abuse she endured is still instilled within her and her children. Tedy, now without his father, is deeply affected by leaving his birth country, where he witnessed his mother sacrifice herself for the safety of her children. Although having a father figure, General Marquez, and the guidance of his god-parents, the psychological damage he endures motivates his need to repeat the actions of his father, an alcoholic and a womanizer. When Tedy has children (Isabelle, Polly, and Betty) he does precisely what his father did to him, he abandons them. The fact that he cannot come to terms with his father's abandonment makes him believe he can abandon his daughters, who are raised by Violeta. As Isabelle becomes older, a vertigo of troubling thoughts leads her to the beginning of her family's history, in Savannah, Georgia. There, she perceives that even 100 years after Peter Jacob and Violeta met, Savannah is still infused with white supremacy, causing her to

return home. Miller concludes the book with the last "*Hablando Sola"* section where Isabelle is able to come to terms with her identity and be at peace.

The Colors of Our Skin, *Color de piel*, as the name implies, centers on race, and a specific translation theory is required to guide decisions that I make in the translation of this novel. In *Translation and Race,* Corine Tachtritis provides decisions and strategies that can be used to grapple with racial discourse in a translation. Tachtritis highlights a strategy where racist language and racism in a text is elevated, allowing the implications and undertones of the text to be more explicit for the reader and thereby denying the audience the opportunity to skim over the racialized language. The implicit racialized language should be made more explicit, which helps the readers identify and locate instances where race is being discussed within the novel. This strategy is essential to translating *Color de piel*, especially in the chapters that take place in Savannah, Georgia. The way that June Rose talks about and to Violeta, is explicit and racially charged, which can be elevated to have a stronger impact. An implicit example of this is when characters discuss their hair, for which the connotations should be reflected in the translation.

I utilize this critical race translational strategy to highlight both subtle and explicit examples of racialized language throughout my translation. If I chose not to highlight the explicitly and implicit racialized discourse within the text, it would eliminate the narrative that Miller is portraying within her novel, and can be seen as a form of erasure. This erasure would be ignoring the themes of Blackness that Miller nuances within her text, and would be a social injustice. An example of this is when Miller describes one of Isabelle's nannies, Estela. Isabelle narrates how Estela would straighten her hair, which represents a self erasure of her African roots. Miller writes, "...tenía poco pelo y casi no le crecía, pero ella se lo planchaba con unos

peines de hierro que primero calentaba al fuego y el cabello le quedaba muy bien" (23). Due to the racial implications of the act of strengthening one's hair. I decided to find ways to elevate those implications within the translation. In the Dominican Republic, straight hair is preferable to curly, natural hair, which is present in this novel. Estela straightens her hair, taming her curly hair, as an act of self erasure of her Black roots. When translating this, I chose to translate the word "bien" as "beautiful" to highlight the connotations of Estela straightening her hair. Furthermore, by translating "bien" as "beautiful", the implication that curly hair is undesirable is made clearer for the reader. My translation of this sentence, which coincides with Tachritis' theory, is as follows: "...she had little hair and it barely grew, but she straightened it with metal combs that she first heated over the fire, then it looked beautiful" (26). Similarly, *Tildar* can have various definitions depending on the context. In this case, *"*tildándola de*"* can be "to stigmatize" or "to brand", which the latter has racial undertones. In the historical context in which the book takes place, the action of branding slaves was in practice, therefore it is crucial to maintain these implications in the English translation.

Tachtritis maintains this ideology of making racialization more explicit, stating that by removing the racialized elements of the text, the original discourse the author implemented into the narrative becomes lost. Another element that can often be lost between the original and translation is the author's race. The author's race and experiences are nuanced within the source text, and it is important to consider their race and background when translating. Miller uses language such as "trigueña/o" and "morena/o" when describing some characters in her novel, this being an instance where she is nuancing race, in this case skin color, into the source text. To maintain the same connotations of the word *trigueña*, originating from the word *trigo,* meaning wheat, an appropriate strategy would be using a "stealth gloss" (Grunebaum). This would leave

the original word “trigueña” in the novel, as it does not have an exact English equivalent, but also provide the English reader enough context to understand the connotations of the word. With this strategy in mind, I translated this word as “trigueña—her skin the color of wheat…”, maintaining the racial connotations of the original text. I employed a similar strategy when translating the word “moreno,” which is referencing someone with darker color skin. Although this word could be translated to English, doing so would be problematic as “dark-skinned” has very different connotations than the original Spanish word. This word, in the context of the novel, is a way to describe someone as having dark skin without saying they are Black. Not using the word Black to describe someone further perpetuates the rejection of Blackness. Another aspect that is lost of this were to be translated literally into English is the etymology of the word; it is closely related to the Spanish word *moro*, someone of African descent—specifically the north of Africa. Therefore, finding an English equivalent would be an erasure of the connotations behind the word, thus, it should not be translated as it would lose the connotations and therefore lessen the racialized discourse of the word. An example of this is when Miller discusses the appearance of Tedy’s brothers, “Uno blanco y el otro moreno” (70). I translated this phrase as “One was white and the other moreno—dark-skinned.” This provides context to the readers of what the function of the word is while also leaving the word in Spanish. This novel exemplifies Tachritis’ theory, which is an intersection between translation theory and critical race theory. Tachritis states the author’s race and background is necessary to understanding the novel. This is evident through the character Isabelle’s own struggles with race and identity. Tachtritis suggests that translators be well-versed in the historical context of the source text, and the culture and race of the author, embracing the racial discourse in the text and leaving nothing ambiguous.

Similarly, in “Proust’s Oreo”, Layla Benitez-James states the importance of translating the racial undertones from the source text to the target text. Benitez-James’ central argument focuses on cultural differences between the source culture and the target culture, which affect the implications of racialized language. An example of this is Miller’s use of the word “prieto”. This word refers to people with darker skin or someone that is Black, however, it can be used in a derogatory manner depending on the context. In the novel, Miller states, “...nadie quería a un prieto cerca porque dañaba el ambiente. La población estaba formada por negros…” (181). The implications here are derogatory and therefore, it should also be present in the translation. If a U.S. racial slur were used, the implications would shift the setting away from the Dominican Republic, therefore to maintain the foreign setting, the word should remain in Spanish. Although a stealth gloss could be used, the context in which the word is framed provides the reader enough information where the word can be parsed. With this in mind, I translated the sentence as follows: “...nobody wanted a prieto around, because they’d ruin the ambience. The population was made up of Black people…” The use of “Black people” in the sentence that follows, helps frame “prieto” and give the reader context to the significance of the word. Furthermore, the usage of “prieto” engages the reader within the context of the section. It is giving them a glimpse of the racialized discourse in the Dominican Republic, while also maintaining the derogatory implications of the word.

Another instance of racialized language can directly be seen when June Rose uses a racial slur towards Violeta, “...con un tono duro y reprochante donde la palabra ni**er se repetía con encono” (I chose to not write the word, hence the asterisks) (Miller 49). The target culture of my thesis is the United States, where the use of the n-word is a highly contested topic in academia. When translating this word, various complications arise, the first being the word is originally in

English, so there is no interlingual translation occurring.This means that the connotations and implications of the word already exist in English and there is no equivalent that can be used to represent it, other than restating the word in the translation. The next complication that arises is the historical context of the word. In the setting when it is used, Savannah, Georgia, 1919, it is frequently used in a negative way, to discriminate and hate those of darker-skin. June Rose is using this word in a negative, hurtful way, and therefore it is important to understand the damaging implications that this word carries, especially in the context of United States culture. The last complication that arises is the decision of whether the word should be censured or not in the translation. Tachritis and Benitez-James state the importance of maintaining racial language between the original and translated text, and elevating the implications of the words. In this case, this word is extremely harmful, yet, based on the setting of *Color de piel,* this word was in common use among white people against people of color, specifically Black people. Based on these considerations, I have decided it best to keep the word in English, reusing the racial slur from the Spanish text but censoring the slur: "...with a harsh, scornful tone, repeating the word ni**er with bitterness."

Although Tachritis theory states the importance of maintaining the racialized language of a source text, the source culture and the target culture have drastically different connotations with this word. Using this word in a Spanish novel for a Dominican novel is much different than using the same word in an English translation for an American audience. In the context of the United States, it is extremely offensive and therefore I chose not to write the word out completely. This choice aligns with my own personal morals, as this word has deep roots with racialized violence, and I feel uncomfortable repeating it in its completeness.

Translating race, especially translating Blackness, is a highly discoursed topic in Latinx communities. These countries often hold an ideology where being Black and Latinx are "mutually exclusive", where they cannot exist within or precede each other. However, these words shouldn't be seen this way, rather Blackness should be encapsulated in the term Latinx (Peña). This is present throughout *Color de piel,* where the character's skin color is a modifier to their Latinx identity rather than a part of it. Lorgia García Peña's writing discusses this further, urging for the translating of Blackness. According to Peña, Latin American communities have been rejecting their African roots, and therefore this topic is vital to understanding source texts that discuss Blackness in Latin American countries, such as *Color de piel.* Peña states that "[t]ranslating blackness can be an effective political strategy for shattering the hegemony of white supremacy and nation-states through cultural, political, and social media translations historically grounded in racial struggles for liberation and citizenship…" (12). This reinforces the need for the translation of Blackness in Latin America, where Black ancestry has largely been erased, giving in to the racial constructs set by the white man.

The notion of translating Blackness is reflected in the novel through the description of Estela, one of Isabelle's nannies, where she is considered beautiful when her hair is straight and not curly: "...tenía poco pelo y casi no le crecía, pero ella se lo planchaba con unos peines de hierro que primero calentaba al fuego y el cabello le quedaba muy bien" (Miller 23). This statement is important to understanding the idea of beauty standards and race in the Dominican Republic, because it was better for women to straighten their hair (Eurocentric), this act being a rejection of blackness, than keeping their hair curly. The target text should reflect this, as it is essential to the narrative of the novel. The word choice that I used in the translation convey the implications of the original text, that her hair would only be beautiful if she had straightened it:

"...she had little hair and it barely grew, but she straightened it with metal combs that she first heated over the fire, then it looked beautiful." The sentences following this continue stating how her straight hair made her look younger and beautiful, further proving Peña's point on the importance of translating Blackness, which is seen in this example, as it has subtle implications of the rejection of Blackness in the Dominican Republic. The word choices that I use in my translation tease out the implications of straightening her hair, which focus on how her hair was more beautiful and acceptable in society when it was straightened.

Another instance of this is in the section "¡*Negros*, Si!", where Polly comes to terms with her Black son-in-law. Polly's husband, Fabio, is racist and cannot even stand to look at a Black person. Polly, with a similar prejudice, is shocked when her daughter brings her fiancé, a Black man, home. Miller, throughout the section, explores themes of Black identity and subtly weaves it within each sentence. An example of this is Polly's aunt's statement about Blackness in the Dominican Republic, stating "... pues todos tenían el negro detrás de la oreja, ya estuviera la oreja cercana o lejana…" (186). This statement alludes to the African roots of the Dominican people, as it references curly hair—an African attribute. This sentence is extremely important to the narrative of this novel and that of Peña's paper, as it is bringing Black identity and Blackness to the forefront of the translation and discusses Blackness in Latinx contexts. Apart from the inherent Blackness of this sentence, another important aspect to consider is the poetic style Miller uses. The adjectives Miller uses here, "cercana" and "lejana," are not used literally, as markers of distance. Rather, they are used to refer to a "temporal" distance or the age of the person. Therefore, in my translation the phrase reads, "... because everyone was Black behind their ears, whether their ear was leathery or smooth." In order to maintain the allusive style of Miller's writing, I chose to find adjectives that could implicitly refer to age, similarly to the

original text. This maintains the implications of the Spanish text, where Blackness surpasses age; everyone is Black, no matter if they were young or old. Miller uses her figurative language to nuance Blackness within the Dominican Republic, affirming that blackness is not a new topic, rather something that has existed but has gone ignored. This coincides with Peña, who states that translating racialized language and embracing Blackness disrupts the racist ideology that was left during the colonial periods. It allows people to reclaim their identities, and makes the impossibility of being Black and Latinx possible. As stated, the racial constructs of many Latin American countries make it difficult for its inhabitants to identify themselves as Black while also being Latinx. As Peña argues, it is due to the rejection of African roots. However, translating Blackness, allows more visibility to the African roots that have been neglected. Miller exemplifies this in her work, it is ingrained within each of her characters. Peña states that translating Blackness not only allows the reader to see the Other and understand their struggles and differences, but also allows the translator to see the Other as well.

Race and culture intrinsically are bound together, and the elements, allusions, and metaphors Miller uses center around Dominican culture. When translating these elements, it is important to take into consideration what the target audience for the text is. Many strategies can be used, some "normalizing" the source text to the target text, finding "equivalents" in the target culture. This strategy of domestication, if used in my thesis, would be problematic, as the central theme of *Color de piel* is Blackness in the Dominican Republic. If a domestication strategy were to be used, it would adapt the meaning to a United States framework or perspective, which would be an erasure of the nuances Miller includes in her novel. To combat this, I opt for foreignizing strategies which maintain the perspective of the source culture. Venuti states, "Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes

that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience…" (20). My translation utilizes this strategy in two main ways: through the inclusion of Dominican culturally bound concepts, and maintaining the writing style between the original text and my translation. The former is a large term that consists of many specific items, for example: places—such as towns, provinces, and regions; colloquialisms and vocabulary; food; and metaphors. All of these require their own separate strategy, as they are very different from each other.

The setting of my thesis is the Dominican Republic; therefore, the names of places should remain in Spanish rather than being translated. Throughout the novel, I leave the names of places in Spanish, and rarely provide a stealth gloss; The instances where a stealth gloss is needed, I categorize the places rather than providing a full stealth gloss. One exception is when Miller lists many towns, regions, and provinces in a single paragraph; here I categorize them with the phrase "places like…" which is followed by the places Miller includes. This provides readers with enough context without utilizing a gloss for each term, which would disrupt the narrative, pulling the reader away from the setting. If I were to include a gloss, it would imply that, yes, this novel's setting is foreign to the reader, however, they should not immerse themselves into the setting as I, the translator, will provide them with sufficient information. This can cause issues, especially when foreignizing a translation, as "[f]oreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interest of democratic geopolitical relations" (Venuti 20). The exclusion of a gloss is a way to advocate for cultural equity. This shifts the perspective from the United States to the Dominican

Republic, alerting the readers that the translation is foreign, as well as the perspectives that are intertwined within the translation.

Metaphors can prove difficult, as they require a deep understanding of the source culture and must be translated into English in a cohesive way. In the strategy that I am utilizing, a metaphor should make sense in English but also include an aspect of Dominican culture, if the metaphor is culturally bound. An example of this occurs when Polly is describing the birth of her granddaughter, who is Black. The aunts are describing her beauty and they use the metaphor, "Buehh…Papeleta mató a menú' y morocota acabó con to'" (Miller 187). This metaphor uses Dominican colloquial terms for currency to describe how beautiful Polly's granddaughter is. This metaphor was difficult to translate to English, as the colloquial terms did not have equivalents. Furthermore, when brainstorming how I should approach this metaphor, it occurred to me that the use of currency in metaphors, especially metaphors describing beauty, was limited in English. I decided it would be best to find an alternative for the metaphor, descriptors that did not have monetary references but still reflected the meaning of the metaphor. I chose to use flowers as descriptors, as it is common to use them as a metaphor to describe one's physical beauty. After choosing flowers as a category, I realized that I would be eliminating the "Dominicans" of the metaphor, which is present in the colloquial terms for currency. To reincorporate this "Dominicanas" within my translated metaphor, I chose to use the national flower of the Dominican Republic, the bayahíbe rose: "Bwah… there are lilies and dahlias, but she is the real bayahíbe rose" (69). This allows the implications of the metaphor to be present in the translation, while also allowing a cohesive narrative in English.

Another culturally bound concept is food, in this case, Dominican dishes, which can be complicated as there are no equivalents in English, and translating the words literally may not

provide useful information to the readers. Therefore, a useful strategy when approaching this is to provide a stealth gloss when necessary or categorize food items. Giving the reader a general idea of what the foods are, especially when they are listed out, eliminates the need of explaining each individual food item and focuses on the list as a whole. An example of this is in *Hablando sola*, where Isabelle describes the food she grew up eating: "...yo cogiera un peso y me lo comiera de tarticos, empanadillas, bizcochos y masitas…" (24-25). If a stealth gloss was made for each of these foods, it would disrupt the flow of the sentence; therefore, in the translation I chose to write: "...I could take a peso and buy all sorts of sweets; I'd eat tarticos, empanadillas, bizcochos and masitas…" This provides the reader with enough context of what the foods are, while also providing a foreign reading experience for the reader, which enables the Dominican culture within the text to be more visible to the readers.

This foreignization strategy can also be applied to grammar and syntax, which favors the structure of the source text. Jeannette Miller, has an extensive poetry background, and writes this novel with many lyrical elements, in a style often similar to prose poetry. This is evident in the long, flowery sentences that appear in Miller's text, which can be difficult to translate into English. This is in part due to the Spanish language allowing longer sentences than English. This grammatical structure is not as commonly found in English, as sentences are often shorter and the structure more rigid. *Color de piel* has many sentences that would be considered run-on sentences in English. Which are intrinsic to Miller's writing style, as they give a glimpse to her poetry background, therefore the structure of the sentences should be preserved when possible. When approaching these sentences, which often would not be grammatically correct in English, punctuation can be manipulated in order to maintain the sentence structure from the source text. I use semicolons, em dashes, and commas throughout these sentences to make them more

digestible in English. This allows for Miller's writing style, the lengthy, flowing sentences to shine through in the translation, while also maintaining a comprehensible English sentence format even if not grammatically correct.

With this introduction, I aim to contextualize Miller within the Dominican literary canon and bring more visibility to her literature through my translation of her book *Color de Piel*, which I have titled The Colors of Our Skin. Through my translation I portray the richness of her narrative and showcase the nuances that she incorporated within the book. My translation does not force Miller's narrative into an American perspective, instead it highlights and showcases Dominican culture. My translation provides more visibility to Dominican literature and I hope the readers appreciate her culturally rich story; and now, I represent the reader to my translation of Miller's novel, The Colors of Our Skin.

The Colors of Our Skin

Talking to myself

My father died young, but his image has never been erased from my memory. He seemed older than he actually was; he constantly told everyone to fuck off, including Carrillo, who had him killed for it. I've felt distraught ever since then. By choosing his destiny, it's as if he wrote mine. I had to fight against the regime because they had assassinated him. I had to write because he no longer could. I had to hate my uncle because that's who they blamed for his death. Still, that same uncle, an officer in Carrillo's army, made sure we wouldn't freeze when the howling wind danced through our house and he closed the shutters, got down on the floor to doodle in our sketchbooks, punished and corrected us when we stirred up any trouble.

Every Saturday, when our uncle returned from the military academy where he studied, we weren't allowed to cause a fuss or use the bathtub as a makeshift pool, since he had to take a shower and go out in his red '50s convertible so he could dance at the Jaragua with his girlfriends, which were many, and they'd always bring us extravagant gifts, even though it wasn't Día de Reyes or anyone's birthday.

We were three sisters. Polly, the oldest, learned to smoke and wanted me to do it too. She threatened me and even smacked me on the head because I hated the strong flavor of Cremas' cigarettes—which she stole from Lucía so that during siesta time she could smoke them in the garage. Betty, the youngest, was an angel. Shy, with frizzy platinum blonde hair, the tiny nose of a porcelain doll and a sadness in her eyes that made me love her more than anybody.

Polly was skinny and had a crazed look in her eyes, yet everyone said she was exquisite. I never found her beautiful, even though she had soft brown hair, and it looked beautiful with blue ribbons that had patches of yellow and white forget-me-nots—which my grandmother told her to put in her hair whenever it was brushed—and because she was so skinny those dresses made of organza with heavy linen, silk underskirts, puffy sleeves, low rise waists, pleated skirts and sashes of moire with pompoms on the back, also looked good on her. The only thing that took away from her beauty were those matchstick legs. Not a single sock stayed up on her legs; she had to be photographed while sitting or have something placed in front of her spindly legs so she didn't ruin the photo.

It bothered me that they dressed us the same since I was as fat as a three-doored wardrobe, and even though they assured me that I looked like a doll, I didn't like what I saw in the mirror when we went to parties at Casa de España or Casino de Güibia—Polly in blue, me in pink, and Betty in yellow—wearing crowns of flowers and those ruffled dresses that made me feel very embarrassed and as round as a globe.

I never remember living with my mother, but I do remember my great aunts bathing me in a large wash bowl and giving me toast with cheese and chocolate at 5:30. They used metal tongs to hold the food in place, and left it to cook on low heat over tall outdoor stoves with little charcoal underneath. Those sandwiches were delicious, I could eat up to four of them, and they praised me and never put me on a diet.

The second to last of my great aunts was Mélida. She was my adoptive mother, even though we lived with my grandmother, and Mélida would tell us that our parents had given us to her, with the proper paperwork; so in the eyes of the law my two sisters and I were legally her daughters. I think she said it so that in the future we'd thank her, and so we wouldn't abandon

her when she was dying. She loved us and liked to see us look our best, and even though it was true that she herself never bathed us or looked after us, we were always taken care of by nannies and we were lucky that almost all of them were good.

And we had so many memorable nannies. María Lunera went crazy and was sent to the countryside. Estela was a saint; she went to mass and took communion every day. Tall, fat, clean, and Black, she had little hair and it barely grew, but she straightened it with metal combs that she first heated over the fire, then it looked beautiful. When she combed that red-hot metal through her hair, the smell of burnt vaseline was truly unpleasant, but the results were worth the struggle. Her hair came out straight and shiny, and she looked much younger. She was already pretty old and just when she thought she'd be an old maid for life, a man came, he fell in love with her and she left with him, believing that they'd get married. Afterwards we heard that they had problems and we only saw her again when she went to mass, with her fast energetic walk, her hair almost white and her haggard face overflowing with the love of God.

Estela was the one who raised us and gave us manners. Since we were young girls she taught us to wash ourselves three times a day, wash our hands after we ate, not go pee in a stranger's house, not have seconds even if we were offered some, not stare at people eating and never beg. No sir, never ask anyone for anything, not only was it a grand lack of manners, it was dangerous. She also warned us not to sleep in anyone else's bed, much less sit in the laps of men, not even if they were uncles, dads, or grandpas, because, and this she said wide-eyed and with a serious tone of voice, "The Devil tempts."

My abuela made sure we followed Estela's rules and dismissed us when we wanted to go to bed late or we made plates of food in the backyard with the neighbor's kids from our lot. We loved those locrios de salchichon that came out kind of raw and smoked, but they tasted glorious

to us. She also gave us a beating when we showered in the rain, because she said we were going to catch a cold. Under that same reasoning, we never rode roller skates or bicycles, let alone learned to swim.

My real mother was Mélida. She bathed me, dressed me and rocked me in her blue rocking chair when I woke up in the middle of the night; she never beat me and always had a menudito ready, so I could eat whatever candy I felt like. I loved her so much. She was blonde and white, she always smiled, and she drank beer before lunch and at night when it was hot.

Mélida had a big bed and a cedar wardrobe that left a scent on her clothing. In the rightmost section she kept money so that if a confectioner came and she was taking a nap, I could take a peso and buy all sorts of sweets; I'd eat tarticos, empanadillas, bizcochos and masitas until my belly got as big as a drum.

The truth is that I was rough around the edges and clumsy, that's why Polly didn't want to play with me; only sometimes would she let me participate in a game of jacks, but I never won.

My great aunt Amelia was the youngest of nine sons and one daughter—my grandmother, the second youngest, was the one who raised her. She was white, short, and fat with straight black hair; they say that she used to be very pretty. Even though she never got the chance to learn how to read or write, because she was neglected as a child, you couldn't tell. She was hilarious, intelligent, and had a photographic memory. She knew every telephone number and listened to every radionovela, so from seven at night onwards, nobody was allowed to utter a word.

You had to wait until later for her to recount, with great detail, how Dracula's fangs grew when the moon rose, the blood curdling howl of werewolves, the impossible love between the vampire and Diana, but above all—and this was the saddest part—Gunga was his slave and got

many lashes when he disobeyed the Count. Sitting on the step, serving as the entrance to her room, I went into a trance listening to her that was only broken once she sent me to bed because it had gotten late and she was yawning.

Similar storytelling had happened between my dad and his maternal grandfather, the only difference was that Confesor recounted stories of battles, conquests, and especially writers and poets. Papé also taught him to only fly capuchinos, small rodless paper kites, in the windy months, March and April. I still have the photo of that blond boy dressed in a cotton shirt with a sailor collar and Papé, who was his godfather, holding his hand while his straw hat stood out from the thin line connecting the vast ocean with the heavens. Who could've imagined that, as the years passed, Tedy would get fat, ugly, and toothless all because he became aware of his misfortune.

My aunts lived close to the ocean and they were fantastic cooks. Their house had a huge balcony on the second floor that spanned the front of the house. From up there we could see the fortress, the ocean and even the mouth of the Ozama River. After eating, we'd sit in the shaded parts, enjoying the cool breeze while watching military officers leave the barracks and the guards on duty rush to stand at attention.

On the weekends, we loved going on walks. On Saturdays we went to the movies and on Sundays we went to the Cathedral for mass. We dressed elegantly and Papé, at 4 o'clock sharp, picked us up to take us to buy paquitos at Amenguals and eat ice cream at Los Imperiales until it was time for the movie, and since he had an inspector's license, we didn't have to pay for the movie.

It all began to fall apart when we started growing up: our faces full of zits, the experience of a period, the embarrassment that the blood brought us and the fear of dirtying our skirts; that's

why for an entire week we wore dark dresses, to hide any red stain in case we had an unwanted accident.

A little after my first period came, protests started forming against Carillo, the streets and flyers full of slander against the dictatorship. We were teenagers and on Sundays we went to morning showings at the Rialto Theater or the Olimpia so we could meet up with our boyfriends and let them sit with us—but not touch us. I remember watching *Picnic*, and when William Holden was going to kiss Kim Novac, Willy Guitérrez took advantage of the dimming lights and I felt a hot tongue on my lips and didn't even open my mouth. Afterwards I told Polly what happened and said that I hadn't liked it, but she just smiled and told me:

"Don't worry, soon you will."

And she was right. When I was old enough to learn how to kiss, I started liking it more and more until I actually became addicted to kissing, but it scared me because my grandmother told me that what you did upstairs was felt downstairs and when someone kissed you, you could lose control, then they'd fondle you, and after that, your purity could be snatched away.

At 14 years old I sank into a deep sorrow; it was a dread, a fear to leave the house, to get dressed, to eat, to breathe, to talk, to hear what those girls would say when they saw me. Since I was young I have been very fat. When I finally lost weight after much effort, my flesh became saggy, I started wearing glasses, my face got full of pimples, my nose broadened too much, my hair, perfect for the long hair of an angel during processions, turned out to be too curly to be cast as "Elvis Presley's girlfriend" and my increasingly enormous long skirts completed the sad demeanor that had taken control of me. My older sister was skinny, pretty, with a good figure, and a great ability to seduce. My younger sister, blonde, with fine features, styled her hair in a bob that was very fashionable and everyone saw her as the picture of beauty in a tropic of *negros*

and mulatos. My broad hips couldn't stand the heavy flowery linen. I walked around hunched over, trying to hide the breasts that had sprouted from my chest, an unnecessary sacrifice because my aunts said I looked like a swimming champion given how flat I was. My interest in talking to other people saved me.

During get-togethers where the men got there early, I payed attention when they talked about the stolen bases from the ball game the night before, and even though I didn't know a damn thing about baseball, I was engrossed by learning something that I didn't really understand but was the preferred topic of conversation, not only of the young men but the entire island. It seemed I was so interested that one day, when the team that met in the middle of the street to play was missing a player, they gave me a hat and a glove so I could be the stand-in catcher. After a while, I finally got over my old fear that the ball would break my glasses, pushing my visor back, I adopted a serious stance, meanwhile my heart wanted to leap out of my chest in fear. I was overcome by how good the guy who pitched was. I was scared stiff in a semi-squat, with an enormous glove resting on my skirt and, my goodness! All of the balls were stopped by my glove, one after another the strikes started racking up, meanwhile the guys screamed and hollered out compliments like:

"Damn!"

"No way, dude."

"What a fuckin' catcher!"

And at the end, they congratulated me by hitting me on my back so hard that that night I had to ask Violeta for some pain relief ointment so I could bear it.

But I was happy. From that day on, all of the boys loved me. When they showed up and sat on the little wall near the light post, they looked for me to talk to. It didn't matter to them that

I had braids or glasses, and when they found out that I could dance, I became a girl who men desired.

There I was, with my heavy linen dress and four eyes—as my older sister repeated, jealous that some of her suitors had left her to be by my side—there were so many invitations to dance that, sometimes,lines formed three to four people long and they even fought for their turn when a Jhonny song featuring Severa played. I danced so well that I won prizes at the parties at El Golfito, and that popularity was reflected in my weight and posture. I lost more weight, I strengthened my muscles with exercise, I walked upright with my hips swaying, showing off a carefree expression with little makeup and cat-eye glasses that made me look smart and sexy.

But then they disappeared my papá, and a darkness consumed me from head to toe. Grief wouldn't leave me, it showed up in the notes of a bolero or in the high-pitched voices of the foreign sopranos when a little, almost silent, radio played "Ritorna Vincitor" sung by María Callas, in the middle of a green spring breeze, in the tranquil and restful evenings that brought me to the back porch of the house, to Violeta, with her eyes half-closed in her rustic rocking chair, and I sensed my father was with me, sprawled across the pink flower-covered chaise lounge taking a light nap until he awoke with a start because he was supposed to be out fishing.

My father's murder, and more than that, his inability to come to terms with his own dad's abandonment, made me a link in a chain of bad luck he reinforced by doing the same thing to us, his daughters but it seemed I was the only one who inherited a heart prone to those wounds that hurt without you knowing why.

From then on, my life has been a series of guesswork, repeated mistakes, and redoes; it's like I had never been able to comprehend that you learn from the pain. Death, bombs, prison, exile, marriages, divorces, finally children, and again loneliness, an internal condition that you

live for and end up needing as a defense against everything that you don't want to bother you, protecting the safe place you built based on past rejections.

And that's how I developed an obsession with death, as if it were the end of this serial novel in which I'm trying to play the role of good person, fix other people's lives, sacrifice myself for them, just so that later they can run from me, avoid me like the plague because I am the reminder of their flaws, I am the obligation of gratitude, a sort of outstanding promissory note nobody likes to remember.

But that's the way I lived and that's the way I'll go to rest, in a cemetery plot that I bought when I wanted to be sure I'd have a place they could put me after my death, and somewhere where they could put my family's bodies—the way my grandmother did with hers—so they wouldn't roll around from niche to niche, or end up in a common grave where they'd later be dug up by a tractor to make room for new plots every time the local government changed.

Savannah, Georgia, 1916

"Don't shoot him!"

"Don't shoot him!"

The woman desperately screamed while she ran behind five white men kicking a young man, who was barely groaning in pain. The skinny Black woman let out a scream as she fell on the dusty path. Through the legs and gun barrels moving away, she saw the motionless form of her son, in the middle of a pool of blood gushing out of his body.

Santo Domingo, 1916

Violeta

As evening fell the candelabras were lit and, from a grand piano, the sound of Liszt and Chopin swept over the scene. A chartreuse green satin dress with lace clung to Violeta's body, her hair adorned with rose buds she had just plucked from the garden. Her perfume mixed with the sound of clinking glasses and murmured the conversations of poets, politicians, and soldiers, quarreling to see who was worthy of her attention.

Her sisters surrounded her, taking advantage of the radiance she emitted. She was tall, trigueña—her skin the color of wheat—with perfect teeth and a contagious smile. The shape of her arms and her waist, being near perfection, inspired sculptors and painters. But the most beautiful thing about her were her dark almond-shaped eyes which had a cunning and mysterious quality to them.

She was a stunning woman, but she was more than her physical beauty: she had her proven intelligence, undeniably excellent voice, never-ending benevolence, unlimited compassion for others, humble dedication to everyone, and a love of God.

Violeta had always been happy. Her childhood was spent playing games with her sisters, taking voice and piano lessons, picking silk and lace for Sunday morning dresses, and helping her mamá when she cooked exquisite dishes in the enormous kitchen on gas stoves. Pork chops seared with Sherry, pork tenderloin stuffed with ham, or doves brought from Cibao, stewed in red wine so that Don Confesor could show them off to his evening dinner guests. Violeta only made it to the eighth grade, which was more than sufficient in a time where women were taught to sign their names but never learned to read or write, because that made them dangerous. But

Don Confesor insisted that his daughters study languages, literature, and music, motivated by the new education trends that had appeared on the island.

Violeta became engrossed performing *Sigismund's Monologue* or passages from *The Three-Cornered Hat*, she recited Rubén Darío and as if that wasn't enough, she sang "Aria de la Locura de Lucía de Lammermoor" like an angel. Those arpeggios earned her the reputation of having the greatest voice in her country.

She was kind and had perfect teeth; she was intelligent and cultured; she was pleasant, elegant, knew how to cook exquisite dishes, and was the daughter of Don Confesor and Doña Adelita, two prominent members of a tight-knit society that was just starting to sprout from the rurality and ravages of the civil wars.

Her entire life, she had been prayerful and humble. From the time she was young, she'd sit in the backyard at night with the maids to smoke artisanal tobacco, and when they didn't have enough money to buy cigars, she'd take some from Don Confesor's room, promising herself when she was older, she'd pay him back for them. It didn't seem fair her dad could have unopened boxes of Havanas while the maids and her neighborhood friends couldn't relish in a late-night break huffing out wisps of smoke—looking at the moon and stars, reciting stories from the countryside, which always included a death, a ghost, or a demon like bacá, filling the mood with so much fear you'd want to sleep deep under your sheets.

By fifteen, there wasn't a poet or politician who hadn't been enamored by her features. They waited for Sundays, when she went to mass with her mother and sisters, to greet Doña Adelita and while they were at it, glanced at Violeta with eyes like sacrificial lambs. On occasion, they managed to pass her a little folded note, their words forming verses dripping with love and heartache. She'd take them, like it was a chore, so that later—reading those lachrymose

lines with her sisters—she could roar with laughter, adopting the different tones of voice of her multiple admirers, which made everyone say she had a knack for theatrics. And she did. As soon as her vocal coach made sure that her voice wouldn't alter, he began to train her with coloratura exercises, and in under a year she was singing in charity soirees.

As soon as they announced her name, the theater would fill to the rafters and her figure, covered in lace and chiffon, would appear between the red velvet curtains as rose petals rained down from the balconies, which illuminated by the flames of the candelabras, formed rainbows and covered the entire stage.

Her photo appeared in the most prestigious publications, decorated with sketches of garlands and situated above laudatory poems. Presidents and governors had formed an association with her name to raise funds and send her to Escala de Milán, sure that from there she'd find the range and discipline that her vocals deserved, but her papá refused. He insisted if Violeta were to travel, her eleven-membered family had to go too, which was impossible—and he knew that better than anyone. She felt herself die, and in the middle of this heartbreak-fueled disaster, the Americans showed up.

They had already occupied Puerto Rico and Haiti, and in 1916, it was her country's turn. The troops disembarked immediately, the population split between those fascinated by the invaders' white skin and ocean-blue eyes, and those who saw their sudden appearance as a malicious act with the intention to take over their country. This same division popped up in Violeta's house: Confesor couldn't stand looking at them; Adelita wished that groups of them would walk by so she could bask in their physical beauty, an ideal instilled in her by the European values of her ancestors.

One Sunday, while waltzes were playing at an evening party and Violeta and her sisters were twirling around the park gazebo, she saw a soldier coming closer to her, and in English he said, “Hello, sweetheart.” She understood, dropped her smile that attracted everyone and continued walking, although she *did* turn her head while she said in a low voice, “That gringo must be crazy.”

He was a handsome man, average height; he had ocean-blue eyes, smooth little teeth that made him look child-like, and his direct and spontaneous ways made her think he was kind. She later found out that he played flute in the invading army’s Music Band. He started waiting for her when she left mass; he botched Spanish words in an attempt to talk with her, ignoring the fact that she knew English. By the end of the month, he was visiting her house at the same time in the evening that her sisters waited to welcome their friends and admirers—who were reciting verses of poetry, playing the piano, or singing songs and ballads for them in the grand hall.

The candles of the gold candelabrum burned, wavering from the river breeze that entered, which was stronger during that hour when the evening melted into the night, and mist invaded the corners of the room. Her sister Carmen’s feet disappeared under the piano. In the background, Apolinar hurriedly wrote the verses he nearly forgot when he heard her voice singing arpeggios, mimicking bird songs. Her father was in the center, sitting in the wicker rocking chair Italian artisans had designed with ornate etchings and gaps, which allowed the stagnant heat to properly circulate. A manila shawl seemed to be carelessly tossed on the grand piano, creating a much-needed pop of color that lit up Violeta’s face. She was in a wine-red lace dress that squeezed her body, a large taffeta bow around her waist, her lambskin boots barely covering her ankles, allowing the bottom of her leg to show with every step. Her silky skin, hugged by clothing that made her look older, drew in everyone's gaze. She was kind and

charming; she leaned on the piano with her right elbow, placing her head on her closed fist and smiled, a crown of diamonds covering her forehead, and some coppery brown hair falling across her eyes. At the end of the song, some sort of whisper started moving through the audience, blown away by her voice and beauty. The poet hurried to show her what he wrote, but before he could reach her, a foreign tongue was heard, and the outline of the North American immediately became visible in the doorway.

He confidently advanced towards her father, who paid him no mind, to greet him and then turned towards her mother who, from the moment she saw him, couldn't stop smiling.

Santo Domingo, 1916

Peter Jacob

His name was Peter Jacob. He had no manners; anybody could tell by the harsh tone of his voice and the way he used silverware. Sometimes he'd have too much to drink and the effects of the alcohol made him crack jokes that most people laughed at—actually, they laughed at him rather than what he said. He insisted on speaking in Spanish and botched some words but his blue eyes shone like the ocean during midday and his teeth, perfect and white, lit up his face.

Adelita found him to be beautiful and above all, white. She was a descendent of the French and freed Black slaves, even though her features were small and her hair fell over her forehead. She believed white skin to be a gift from God and she had been happy ever since the Americans arrived, surrounded by tall, blond men, who were boisterous and drunk, filling her home in the evening, mingling with lawyers, poets, soldiers and the country's main politicians—who were Black and impoverished, part of a glum, sweaty reality that deep down she had always rejected.

When she was very young, she married Confesor Montero, a descendant of Galicians who, just like her, had Black ancestors who gave him his curly hair and noteworthy stature. He was an important and respected man who only spoke to give her orders but he couldn't even glimpse at her legs without immediately snatching her up, slamming the enormous bedroom door, and making love to her. That's how they ended up with nine children, and the second child was the only boy. Everyone said that God showed him mercy because if that macho man had only had daughters, the sheer disappointment would've killed him before it was actually his time.

Sleeping with her husband, giving birth, nursing, changing diapers, and cooking, Adelita's youth withered away in an instant and she saw herself at 45 years old, hair full of gray strands, and a memory that forgot things as if it was trying to escape her life of obligation, labor and keeping up appearances.

Of all her daughters, Violeta was the one she loved most. She was everything Adelita had wanted to be. Tall, beautiful, fit, funny, smart, kind… One day she heard Apolinar say that when Violeta entered a place, she lit it up, projecting her light and warmth, and everyone piled up trying to be close to her, hear her voice, and breathe in that warm perfumed breath that escaped her lips with every word, which made people go crazy; they were paralyzed with the anxiety that one day, they might be able to have her, and take pleasure in her body and soul, which were pure bliss.

When she entered mass, they immediately made space for her in the front pews so she could sit down; when she went to a dinner, all of the guests wanted to sit next to her; when she entered Club Unión on those nights of bronze banisters and glowing lanterns, red carpets welcomed her and verses, dedicated to her, were written on full length mirrors, signed by the most prestigious of the naciona's poets.

Now, Adelita sat in the living room of her house and soaked up the American's smile; he only had eyes for her daughter and she was sure he was the one for Violeta, that with a man so handsome and white, her daughter would surely find happiness and go live in the country she had only seen on Christmas cards—cabins with soft couches and lit chimneys in the middle of the snow; elk and turkey prancing outside the illuminated windows. Yes, her grandchildren would be white and blond, and when they'd come to visit her, she'd show them off with pride, nobody would compare to those cherubs with sky-blue eyes.

But her daughter didn't seem so enthusiastic. When the American placed his hand on her shoulder, she moved away annoyed, thinking he was insolent. It was impossible for her to be with Apolinar. Even though he belonged to one of the best families in the East, was studying law and got paid for the articles he wrote for Listín Diario, the pay wasn't enough for him to even afford a laundry woman. He spent his time lending her poetry books and romantic novels, which they'd later discuss sitting with each other, looking into each other's eyes, their fingers brushing when they flipped through volumes of Bécquer and Isaacs, the smell of his shaven beard and cologne etched into her soul; she could only smell it on the dark evenings when heat made his body sweat, and the pleasure she felt was suffocating. Some kind of wooziness made her silent while her heart beat out of her chest.

Apolinar was turned on by this magnificent woman who smelt like jasmine, her soft, brillant fabric brushing up against him, he was smitten by her, and every dawn the first rays of the sun caressed his face—submersed in stained papers and spilt ink—trying to put the impossible love that tormented his heart into black and white. He sometimes hunched over the small table in his room, surrendering to his exhaustion, waking up at 2 or 3 a.m. with a dazed look, his dark, tired eyes accented with bags underneath them.

He was tall, skinny and always dressed in white linen and a straw hat; he had wavy black hair that shone, a sharp nose, and a bushy beard that barely could conceal his thick lips, which couldn't conceal the sensuality of his passions.

Apolinar was a radical opposer of the invading forces. His articles devised a pro-independent theory that transcended both politics and economics, spelling out key points of an idiosyncrasy that wouldn't bow to cultural strategies and lifestyles that were foreign to them. His name and his presence, wherever he went, caused mixed reactions, but no one despised him

for his seriousness, courage, and his ability—the crowning touch for the many women who knew him ending up under his spell.

He was so respectful he came off as shy, as if his excessive sensitivity didn't let him stray one centimeter from what he believed an upstanding man was, trained by the belief that his father repeated to him regularly:

"A man never dirties the water he will drink from." Violeta was the reason for his restless nights, that pestering bitter feeling that never left him be; between book pages and newspapers he was reminded of her jasmine perfume, her sensual and alluring laugh, and her smooth lips from which a high-pitched voice, that worried about him, was produced; this worrying stopped almost immediately, she left behind her words and began to hum, which was drawn out by the piano, and cut through the air like a crystal dagger.

He didn't blame her; they were barely eighteen and everyone wanted her. Violeta knew it and she felt incapable of choosing one of her many suitors, one of them to give her heart to. She was the queen bee, the belle of the ball, a presence that nobody could ignore. This made her feel powerful as she glided across marble floors and the brush of her underskirts produced an intoxicating rustle that kept men impassioned, as she moved through the light of the candelabra, causing heartache and joy.

But her mother got the better of her and she married Peter Jacob. Violeta couldn't escape the fairy tales that Adelita told her every night in her room, when she gave her a good night's kiss and assured her that her future would be like *Little Women* but without the conflicts of the Civil War.

She was forever disillusioned by the night of her first sexual encounter. Unreservedly, the blond soldier got naked and made her his own with swiftness—fueled by lust and

champagne—while she suffered through the pain and brutality, terrorized, believing her life would be like this forever. She later became accustomed to bearing the weight of that body weakened by alcohol, and hasty to satisfy himself, he never even knew that she didn't feel pleasure.

Savannah, Georgia, 1919

Violeta

The city looked like a boat in fog. Willows groaned at the passing breeze forming veiled tunnels. At any given hour, greenish grey shadows covered the passerby. She had never seen a city so sad yet so beautiful.

Being there was like living in nostalgia, suspended in the sunsets where she saw medicine men on their way to the cemetery nestled in the town's center, waiting for the first star to appear so they could begin their conversations with those beyond the grave. The women dropped pebbles and shells on the first tomb, to form messages asking for advice or informing their far away relatives what was happening in the city. As night fell, faint lamps barely lit the cobblestone streets in which a few people were slowly traveling so as not to slip.

Peter Jacob's parent's two-bedroom house was small; there was a small room that was converted into the dining room, which was next to the kitchen, and a large patio with an uneven stone floor, invaded by weeds, empty sacks of flour, and broken furniture almost rotted away from the humidity. You could see part of the river from a hill next to the wire fence, where sometimes enormous barges appeared, transporting passengers and agricultural products to other cities. When she had finished the work that her husband's mother assigned her, Violeta would sneak out and climb the hill to stare out at the inlet, where she managed to see, and from time to time hear, the whistle of ferries. Then the water transported her back to her parent's house, her sisters' smiles, the flowers, and the clinking glasses when the best of her city toasted her on those nights of music and poetry that she'd no longer experience.

She never again laughed like she had in her home. Here, starting at dawn, her spouse's mother yelled at her to get out of bed, put the milk on the stove, and prepare the porridge her inebriated husband ate so he could stumble from the house to his day job. Violeta fixed her eyes on his back until he disappeared down dusty roads that took him to the outskirts of the city, to the Black neighborhood where small, worm-eaten wooden houses were stilted over bogs and water drains. And instead of willows, thin pines grew up toward the sun, forming blocks that leaned into the heavens, hiding the poverty and hideousness.

She was unhappier than she had ever been, having deceived herself into creating an image of growth and well-being with that handsome, blond soldier. And now, the low blow was this life of servitude that her mother-in-law subjected her to, branding her as Black and yelling profanities at her while she washed clothes in the backyard with her feet buried beneath the mud in the piercing cold, while her stomach growled. She'd work until that wretched man decided it was about time to come back drunk, reeking of women, and with a reduced wage—a bottle of milk and two or three packets of rice that she and her son ate greedily at dawn.

The near-frozen water poured forth while she, completely lost in thought, washed the pots and pans. Her hands were covered in small nicks, leaving her skin raw. The soap, a bluish paste that barely made suds, gave off a strong sulfur odor that made her morning sickness worse. Her growing belly could barely dodge the drops of water splashing the front part of her dress—a blue dressing gown with faded stripes that let the cold October breeze in. Her black sweater also got wet, even with the sleeves rolled up. Her hands bled, yet she didn't feel pain, her eyes remained fixed on the pot while she tried to remove the flour stuck to the bottom of it.

She could hardly remember her parents or her house in this inhospitable land where she had experienced every kind of humiliation. It had been a year since she arrived and when she

stepped over the wooden doorstep, her husband's mother looked at her, shocked, and immediately scolded her son in a harsh, scornful tone, repeating the word ni**er with bitterness. Then Violeta realized that *she* was the ni**er. Her mother-in-law never tired of repeating it as she assigned her the worst jobs of the house. One day she went to find a portrait of her father, kept safe in a leather trunk she had brought and where she hid the clothes she wasn't allowed to wear because her mother-in-law thought they were sinful, but she found nothing, no trunk, no portrait, and no dresses. She later found out that the woman had taken the photo to some of her weekly racist activists' meetings, to show everyone that Violeta was Black because her father was a mulato.

From then on, she started to be frightened. It wasn't enough her father-in-law was friendly and caring towards her; he helped her with the buckets of water, he put blankets around her when the cold set in, and above all else, he looked at her full of sympathy when he saw her trembling from having nothing in her stomach, sitting on the porch steps waiting for her husband to come back while his mother dozed in front of a crackling fireplace from the exhaustion of the night before.

The old man pronounced things differently, and a few months later Violeta found out that he was from Germany and had arrived in America full of ambitious dreams. He was a baker, and his son was a painter; they lived in a poor white neighborhood. The Ku Klux Klan had recently restarted, and June Rose went to their meetings.

Violeta had nightmares of Spanish Conquistadors burning Black people on spits as if they were roasting pork. Confesor had told this to all his daughters, expressing the brutality behind the famous "discovery" of America.When they exterminated all of the indigenous people on the island, they brought Black people from Africa, who they hunted like animals and forced into

slavery to replace the indigenous—who were exploited for gold. The shrieks of the burning people were horrifying, and she tossed and turned in her bed, panting till she let out a scream; Peter Jacob's mother said that on top of being Black, she was crazy. And it seemed true, when she woke up from those horrible dreams and she was left trembling until, finally, after repeating, "Jesus, son of David, take pity on me" she began to calm down, closing her eyes just before dawn, only to open them again and start the torture of a new day.

It was the old man who had helped her when she had Robert, and with a red-hot knife, he cut the umbilical cord. For months, she had a ring-like mark on the inside of her lips—where she had bitten them until they bled so that her mother-in-law didn't hear the screams from birthing. Only two years old, Tedy watched her facial expressions and stifled cramps without understanding. From that point on the boy grew up in silence, as if he'd been warned that danger and maliciousness lurked around every corner.

Savannah, Georgia, 1919

June Rose

June Rose was the second child of a Dutch couple; they arrived in the United States as immigrants. Her real name was Janne, which was Hebrew for “gift of God”, but on arrival, the registration office wrote it down as “June”, and the Rose remained untouched—for which her mother consoled her, saying they had Americanized her name. Her father called himself a Lutheran pastor and was sent to the South where he opened a church on the edge of a plot of land they assigned to him. He always wore black, and he could interpret the Bible as he pleased; so much so that the mildest thing he said was that Black people were ugly and poor because they were evil spirits paying off huge sins and they deserved nothing. That’s how June Rose was raised, alongside five other siblings, after her mother, a small, sweet woman, died in labor.

She learned to read and write what was necessary to teach the Bible passages she repeated to her siblings during dinner, and to jot down the baptisms and prayers that her father charged in installments after seeing that it was a poverty-stricken area. At twenty years old, she noticed that every Sunday while she was passing the offering plate, a hardy young man was looking at her and smiling. He was a German immigrant, serious and hardworking, his heftiness softened by his tender voice and manners, which was a rare sight. He had a small bakery that sold pastries as well as bread, since his zeal led him to learn the art of baking in no time, stating that it didn’t matter to him if the cake was beautiful if the dough wasn’t delicious.

Gunter was attracted to that skinny hard-working girl who barely spoke, he knew that to get ahead in this country he had to fight hard, and he dreamed of a stable job, a tranquil home, and as many children as God would bless him with. They got married after eight months, more

out of necessity than true love. Gunter had bought a house close to his work, with a small garden and a large backyard, hoping that if he was considerate and treated her well, she would be delighted, and as the children arrived, they would expand the house. It didn't take long for Gunter's kindness to make June Rose feel a hint of happiness.

When she had her first son, who turned out to be the only one because she was on the verge of death, her life took a turn towards the babe God had sent her. Perfect from the moment he was born, with ocean-blue eyes and dimpled cheeks, he didn't inherit his father's perseverance or his mother's diligence. From when he was seven, he was ditching school and had to be searched for in the outskirts of town, where he was found perched up in the tallest of trees from which he could shoot down sparrows with a slingshot that he had patiently and skillfully made, while he perfectly imitated the birds' melodies.

Because of this, when he turned twelve his parents enrolled him in the music classes held at his Sunday school and there, he learned to play the flute. It wasn't a surprise to find him at the cemetery in the middle of the night playing blues amidst the tombs, as the moonlight created a backdrop that turned the scene into a theatrical performance. At fifteen years old he became acquainted with bordellos, prostitutes fought over him so he could sing a Black song that reminded them of their childhood and the history of their dangerous lives, which inevitably made them cry. So, it was them who would pay Peter; he'd come home at dusk, sneaking in through the kitchen door that his mom didn't latch, while pretending she didn't hear him. The next day she had his breakfast ready, scared to death that he'd take off.

She was filled with ill will towards that man she'd have to live with until death did them part; because of his kindness towards Black people and the affection everyone had for him, Gunter no longer mattered to her. When they started drafting, Peter Jacob left with the soldiers.

Not to fight, but to explore and get to know exotic places where his free spirit could nurture his drive and curiosity.

Savannah, Georgia, 1919

Gunter

When he saw her for the first time, her scared eyes searching that narrow humid place with one child in her arms and another in her stomach, it was clear by his wife's attitude she'd never accept Violeta. He, on the other hand, went to her and helped her carry an enormous embossed leather trunk.

Gunter Blum had come to the United States thirty years earlier. His father was forced to seek his fortune in America because of the hunger the German winters brought and consequences of the Franco-Prussian War, and even though he didn't have money, he was able to open a bakery in that little town in the confederate South that glorified its heroes and paladins, and was extremely racist.

His family raised him Protestant and when they arrived in America, they found out that there were multiple interpretations of the Bible that Gutenberg had printed and Luther translated, so that believers could know the word of God directly from its source. However, here, many of these religions were sects led by someone who knew how to talk, calling themselves Calvinist, Lutheran, Evangelical… with the sole purpose of confusing the many illiterates, so they wouldn't find out they were being robbed when the offering plate came around.

As the calm and reflective man he was, he decided to read his Bible every night and got used to accompanying his wife during Sunday services at a Lutheran church, which was quite different from the one of his hometown.

He noticed the clothes his son's wife and child had arrived in, and realized they were the clothing of the rich. The way that she carried herself confirmed that she was also educated, making him wonder why a woman like her would've married his son.

Peter Jacob was the only child they had, since June Rose almost died when giving birth to him and had to get parts of her organs removed. After that, the serious, kind, and hard-working girl that Gunter had married became a hot-headed bitter woman, so much so that she started attending the meetings of a group that hated Black people, and he started to notice that many of the people they once knew had started to fear them.

The compass to his soul, his only son, turned out to be a rascal. He only worked to get a few bucks so he could go to the bar to play, drink, and meet women. More than once he had to get injections to cure some venereal disease. At the outbreak of World War I, the North American Army started to draft soldiers, and they hooked him by offering him a place in the band playing the flute. He immediately accepted, because his adventurous spirit assured him he'd never be sent to the line of combat and would get to know other countries for free.

The troops had already occupied Puerto Rico and Haiti, and he was sent to disembark in the Dominican Republic, a country full of beaches, coconut trees, and beautiful mulatas who were just crazy about white men. There, he was able to enter high society salons that he never would've dreamed of. In Savannah he was a poor white man, "white trash" as the rich white people would say, and that was almost as bad as being Black.

When Peter Jacob returned to his parent's house, Gunter had to give him a job at his bakery because he couldn't find one anywhere else. He was a house painter and there were many houses being constructed; however, everyone knew he was irresponsible and a drunkard, so they avoided him. He barely worked half his shifts at the bakery. He was arriving late and leaving

early. But what could Gunter do? He was his son, he had a wife and child, with another on the way, and they all needed to eat.

In the dark narrow wooden house, they renovated his single bedroom, which barely fit a double bed, laying out a cot for the little boy, Tedy. Even though Gunter had told June Rose to treat them well, since they were kin, when he closed his shop and returned home with a loaf of bread fresh from the oven, he could tell by the foreigner's eyes and her child's face that they hadn't had anything to drink all day. He watched her sweep, mop, carry water from the kitchen to scrub dishes, and clean everyone's clothing in silence. One day, he noticed her fingers were raw and bleeding, so he gave her a menthol salve and her eyes filled with tears.

Almost a month after she arrived, one Saturday afternoon when the sun illuminated the porch where Violeta sat, he tried to teach her some elementary words through signs and symbols, and wasn't he surprised when she responded back in English.

Savannah, 1921

KKK

The few times Peter Jacob came home sober, the old crone demanded him to kick Violeta out of their house and for them to go live in the Black neighborhood, but he refused, although each time less forcibly. He had found a job fixing roofs in the suburbs, a job few white men did, and that caused him to be ignored by everyone in town, but above all, it embarrassed June Rose.

One day Violeta saw two men speaking with her mother-in-law, who she didn't let pass until, and after pointing back to her and her children, she became full of dread. The group intently stared at them and then nodded. Violeta remembered that those two men were there when the fortune teller's son was murdered and in that very moment, she knew that if they didn't leave, they'd be killed. From then on, the oldest of the two men came by the house daily, he'd watch her every move as she'd run to hide her children in their room.

The evening Violeta found out that the house of a man, who supplied produce to a farmers market employing Black people, had been burnt down; she wrote a letter to her cousin—who lived in New York—telling her of the hell she was living in. Before the end of the week, she was sent three tickets back to the Dominican Republic. She picked up what little the old racist had left her, and grabbed Tedy by the hand and carrying the baby; she boarded the ship without looking back.

Santo Domingo, 1922

Violeta

She opened the door to her room and a cool breeze battered the white, recently washed curtains. Her impeccably tended canopy bed seemed to welcome her home. The smell of flowers teased her senses and when her feet touched her silk slippers, they rejoiced. Outside in the backyard, her son ran after the chickens while Amelia rushed towards him to shower him with kisses.

How could she ever have left?! How could she have married a man that she never loved?! Now, everything that had been important to her, her hopes and her triumphs, all led her to this point, where she was 23 and had two kids. Her papá supported her and always on alert, hiding her away because she was more beautiful than ever. When they went to mass on Sundays, her sisters were attentive to every gaze. She felt defeated, yet grateful, because anything was better than the hell that was Savannah, the place where she learned to fear for her and her children's lives.

It had only been a year but she already was accustomed to lingering in her room when someone visited, skipping the dances at Club Unión, and avoiding the concerts or the night-time parties at Parque Colón. She only left to go to mass on Sundays, because that's all her father allowed. She made do with listening to her sisters telling her what they were enjoying, describing the new trends and décor, and every once in a while, they were whispering in her ear that Major Márquez was asking about her. He never missed Sunday mass and was always looking for a way to get close to her family and talk with her.

One day, her sisters told her that whatever she did, not to go out to the front porch. Half an hour later, her father was calling for her and said: “Major Márquez just came by asking for your hand, he said you’ve never spoken to each other before. If you agree, I’m allowing him to come see you for the next two weeks so you can get to know each other, but remember that divorced women aren’t a commodity. He’s ready to marry you right away and take care of your sons. Márquez is a decent and respected military man. He too is divorced and has two daughters who live with their mother.” Her heart twisted and she almost fainted, she made a nodding motion and darted to the room she shared with her kids, falling to her knees in front of her bed and she began to sob brokenly.

The first time Armando came to see her, she felt mortified. He was a stocky, tall man, with olive skin, and thick lips that shielded perfect teeth; his straight hair and eyebrows were black, he had dark eyes, and his noble expression made him seem more attractive than he actually was. His uniform, kepi, and gaiters created an authority broken only by his kind voice and noble mannerisms. He paused at the opening of the front gate, took off his kepi and slightly tilted his head forward with a delicacy that impressed her. She was sitting in one of the rocking chairs, and barely two meters away, her three sisters occupied the sofa in the living room. Across from Violeta were two other rocking chairs swaying to the rhythm set by her parents. Don Confesor got up and scooted an engraved, high back chair near her. The soldier, still standing, told him in a respectful tone: “Don’t worry, Confesor sir, my visit will be short.” And it was. He only came by to say from the moment he laid eyes on Violeta walking to mass, he fell in love. And if she knew of his divorce, his two daughters—and agreed—he’d promise to be a father for her kids, assuring her she’d always have his love and respect.

By the third visit, Mayor Márquez scooted his chair a few inches closer, and the manly aroma his skin gave off made her jittery. His big, slightly thick, hands were ornamented with clean, cut, fingernails, and when he laughed, everyone followed suit in that burst of spontaneity and charm which was unique to him. By the end of the month the wedding date was set. After a simple ceremony with only a few family members, they toasted their champagne and she, grabbing hold of Armando's arm, left home for the second time. She crossed the threshold of her house, the place she was born and raised, and was determined she wouldn't be coming back.

That night, from their bed, Violeta could tell the way her husband was pacing around the sunroom, and after almost two hours he snuck into bed beside her, thinking she was asleep. From then on, she started to fall in love with that respectful and polite man, so full of kindness and affection that he could barely give her a peck on the cheek. One day, when they were at the theater, she rested her head on his shoulder and he barely touched his lips against hers. Violeta shuddered from the contact of his warm, full lips, and the next day she kissed him while bringing him coffee in bed. Ever since then, every night, every evening, every morning, and every dawn, their bodies intertwined, full of passion and tenderness; she finally knew what true happiness was.

By the end of the year, she was pregnant and after nine months a boy realized all the soldier's dreams, since he only had daughters. The house was a cacophony: the child's babbling mixed with Tedy's lessons, which he recited aloud, and the sound of the soccer ball being kicked around outside by Robert. Confesor showed Tedy how to read and introduced him to the neighbors, who never were able to have kids, and started spoiling the two oldest, to give Violeta time to take care of the youngest. After that, Lidia and Gabriel, who the kids called Mamé y Papé, were almost like their second parents.

A few years later, Armando was promoted to colonel and after that, general. As time passed, he found that nothing was enough for the son who'd carry on his first and last name, and his family's legacy. As he grew, the boy started looking like him, but much more fine and handsome, he inherited his mother's eyes and her skin color. At eighteen, the girls were dying to be with him.

His dad had him trained by the best. Armando, more than fifty years old, took pride in that boy who the entire capital yearned for. He was almost his abuelo, and from the time his son learned how to drive, he bought him a red convertible with a white top, in which Cuqui—Armando Jr.'s nickname—was a hit.

Santo Domingo, 1938

The General's House

Ever since she married the General, her life had undergone a complete change. For the first time, she was the head of the house. In Savannah, Peter Jacob's mother didn't allow her to lay a finger on the clothing unless she was washing it. Now, she was deciding the meals, furniture and its placement, and trying, as best as possible, to manage the money her husband always gave her—which, many times, was above what she expected.

He was a noble and good man, he even let her give some singing classes in the Conservatorio, more for her amusement than to make money; this way, Violeta could exercise her voice and teach others twice a week, which filled her with energy and satisfaction. He also didn't stop her when she'd buy the same things for her three kids: the same belts, shoes, shirts, pants and tuition for the same schools… The only difference was, she spent more time with the youngest, carrying and playing with him, which was justified because he was the littlest. Violeta did the same for the General's children when they visited. He never even realized she treated them the same as her own children, she'd even go on their behalf to talk with the General when they made surprise requests, which made the two girls love her like she was their real mother.

She gathered enough money, from her good sense of saving and budgeting, to buy a plot of land in the outskirts of the city. The barrio was new, without any construction, but it did have a church, and that was enough. Her plot of land was right in front of the parish and there, little by little, she started building the house of her dreams. Finally, when she was able to finish the first floor, she brought her sister Lucía to live with her. She was the least attractive sister and had been living alone; she had a great love for cleaning, especially washing and ironing clothing—so

much so, that without being asked, she'd do it with great pleasure, like it was an art. Her biggest joy was when the General would tell her, "Nobody irons a shirt like you do." Her duties kept increasing as the boys became men, but she took a special fondness to Armando, the youngest, almost thinking of him as her son.

Lucía was short and gaunt and she'd go to the back porch—which the staff also shared—to smoke and drink when night fell. She always wore a blouse with pants or an outfit of dark-colored stripes that looked like pajamas. She had short straight hair that was slicked back. Kind-hearted and humble, she forced herself to work like a dog, which she completely justified due to the welcome she had received from her sister, and she only counted on the small gifts that the General himself put in her hands—in the form of money—as a way to pay her for all the housework she did.

Tedy's brothers were the complete opposite of each other. One was the son of a Yankee invader and the other, the great-great-grandson of one of the Padres de la Patria—the men who fought for independence of the Dominican Republic. One was quiet and the other unruly. One was white and the other moreno—dark-skinned. One had the same memories as Tedy and the other was living in the present like the only child of a cherished and important man.

It was said Robert was the most handsome, he had skin white like the snow, eyes like the calm sea, and blond hair that danced in the wind. Cuqui was also handsome; he was tall, in shape, weak-kneed around women, and everyone found him splendid; he was a charming and attractive man, although a bit dark for the likes of society.

The former became a doctor and the latter a soldier. The two adored Tedy with an affection that was a mix of admiration and wistfulness of not taking the risk of throwing everything away and living the lives they wanted. They loved him because he was the oldest,

because he always protected them, because he took them to their first prostitutes, because he taught them how to drink and disobey—but, above all, because when he opened his mouth, out gushed his memories, weaving a bright, gauzy mesh where the cays of Samaná and the Savannah river melded with the political instability of the época montonera and the divorce of the Haiti, the west-side of the island. Then, the names started overlapping: places like Cibao; Hato Mayor and Bahoruco; Boca Chica and Los Mina; people like the taínos, like caciques and defenders Enriquillo and friar Montesinos; foods like melao and casabe; taíno caves and huts, Guácaras and bohíos and bucanes—and then the cathedrals, the cimarrones, the criollos, and invaders, invaders, invaders… Tedy's hoarse voice continued until they dozed off, recounting the reasons for so much injustice, crime, and ambition…

Santo Domingo, 2015

Negros, no!

I learned to value the beauty of Black people when I lived abroad. Comparing the athletic young men with big eyes and stellar smiles with white men so transparent you could see their veins, the Black men came out on top. The truth is the men and women were gorgeous; ebony or mixed, they ended up with the best traits from both races.

The population saw themselves in the posts made on Facebook and Youtube, and the adolescents, when referring to people with pasty skin, used terms like desteñío, bleached; mapuey, a white root vegetable; and salamanqueja, an albino lizard. They grew more comfortable with their skintone when they talked about sex. They were macho men, arrogant, the ones who bagged women…

But, many areas still didn't welcome them, and this was reflected in places of employment, advertisements, property renting and sales and on the fashion runways—nobody wanted a prieto around because they'd ruin the atmosphere. The population was made up of Black people who thought they were white; meanwhile the whiter your skin, the more you'd discriminate against those the color of patent leather, chocolate, or cinnamon. A collective nonsense that sometimes made me laugh, but other times brought me anger—rejecting the injustice caused by a distorted cultural heritage, where Black meant slavery and white meant control, power, authority, and superiority.

In the newspapers, you could only find uber successful people in the sports or entertainment sections; because they either broke a batting record or were urban singers

following North American trends—sporting “back-to-Africa” cornrows while rapping profanities which fascinated the youth and made the adults associate them with delinquency.

One day, Esteban called me, speaking in a downcast tone. He had lost his job as a photographer at one of the most important newspapers of the country. Even though his salary wasn’t much, it was enough for his family’s expenses—his wife and three kids, who were already going to college.

The news shocked me, because the newspaper’s print runs had increased, which was due to the social supplement that had few words but large colored photos. The classic “a picture’s worth a thousand words” was the slogan of trendy journalism. My friend generally covered fashion, the grand opening of establishments, official acts, or interviews with diplomats and foreigners who no one knew, but the “white, elegant, and beautiful” covered the front pages of a publication that everyone bought.

His dismissal surprised me. He was an excellent photographer and a nice person; he was friendly and had very strong relationships. Everyone thought highly of him, because, aside from his amazing studio where he photographed celebrities, he took pictures of his acquaintances who didn’t have money and didn’t charge them a cent.

Plus, his appearance helped him. He was white with Nordic features: light-colored eyes, a thin nose, and an impressive height; the smile he wore earned him the sympathy of those he didn’t know and his name held weight, which was well-deserved, among the country’s famous. Sometimes, he’d wake up early just to do his work; he never left out the shots from the previous night’s activities, which were used as news for the next day’s paper.

A week earlier, he had covered a high-class wedding. He had never seen so much luxury and excess. It was exquisite, from the bride and groom to the decorations and music. Elegance

and good grace stood out in every detail, not to mention the buffet, filled with lobsters from India, Angus filets, little Colombian chickens, etc… That made him wonder if his country didn't have products of similar or better quality.

Throughout the night, the drinks never stopped; waiters were dressed in tropical suits, given the occasion and the climate of a Caribbean island on the border of autumn.

The groom was white and the bride trigueña. The woman looked like a butterfly in her simple, white chiffon dress peppered with rhinestones from France. Her hair, gathered at the nape of her neck, added seriousness to her almost adolescent face, which had perfect features. The groom was dressed in a grey tailcoat, which made him seem out of place in the photo, but his contagious joy and innate elegance spread through the place like a wave of eagerness and happiness.

Everyone looked flawless and when it was time for photos, both families surrounded the bride and groom. There were more Black people than white, that was always the case since the population was majority mulata. For social photos, it was customary to put the lighter skinned people in the front, but in this case it was impossible because they were all family. The flashes came and went and it was almost dawn when Esteban ran to turn in his shots, which would go on the front page of the Society pages.

The next day, the incoming calls were non-stop, congratulating him for how well everything turned out. In the evening, the director's secretary told him the director wanted to see him in his office. Esteban was happy; he had asked for a promotion and was waiting for a response.

When he entered the newsroom, he was surprised by the distant look of his coworker. Almost immediately, he saw the director, with a serious face, walking towards him, and as soon

as he did, he told him, “Go collect your severance pay. I have already told you that in this newspaper, Black people don’t go on the cover page. They almost fired me too”

Santo Domingo, 2014

Negros, yes!

She was Isabelle's older sister, the first daughter Tedy and Margarita had, born prematurely and the size of a Coke bottle. Everyone said she wasn't going to survive, but her abuela brought her home and took care of her; she was put under a heat lamp, covered head to toe in cotton, so she could warm up. They gave her milk diluted in three parts water through a dropper, like a kitten. It took almost a month for her to open her eyes, but she started growing thin yet strong; she had a terrible temper, and climbed trees, threw rocks, rode bikes and roller skates, and she beat up the boys. But as she grew, she gained a few pounds and became a capricious and beautiful young lady which was because she was spoiled rotten, her abuela never forgot how she was born and was always overprotective of her.

An older man fell in love with her, saw her for what she was, and didn't stop nagging her until they got married. They had five children, four boys and one girl. Her spouse couldn't stand looking at a Black person, not even from afar, despite the fact his family was made up of every color. That's why Polly thought she was going to die when she saw that prieto at the front door of her house. She couldn't understand how her daughter could marry a Black man. Her whole family was white, more than just white, they were the whitest. When they were children, her kids had hair so blonde it was platinum, and now, her sweetheart, her only daughter, was in love with a prieto. One day, when her daughter told her she didn't like white people, Polly thought it was a joke: "That boneheaded little girl doesn't know any other way to get attention." But what her daughter said was true, and now she had the proof right in front her.

Yet, the man was friendly and kind; his voice was soft and melodious; he had polite manners and gave surprise presents, guessing exactly what everyone liked. He would say “gift giving is an art, sometimes the most expensive gift didn’t interest someone, but something insignificant could make them happy.” But for that, you’d have to be observant and know the nature of the recipient. For example, he gave Mercedita a chihuahua puppy and that made her ecstatic. Polly didn’t dare utter a word, instead thinking of all the pee and poop she’d have to pick up, because her daughter was very lazy.

Six months later, they were married and the prieto bought a luxury apartment for her. Maybe this is why Polly’s aversion to Rafael was fading. She didn’t deny their invitations to eat together on Sundays anymore, and was comforted thinking that this country was full of Black people of every shade: the color of patent leather, coffee, chocolate, faded black, mulatto, indigenous, honey, creole… because everyone had Black behind their ears, whether that ear was leathery or smooth. She remembered that her aunt told her even with the whitest women, you had to look at the hair growing from the back of her neck, if it was curly, you could confirm she had some Black in her lineage.

Polly remembered when she married Fabio. Her husband was very white and had hair so straight he had to put vaseline in it just so it wouldn’t flop over his forehead. On top of being a racist, he was also stingy, hoarding his money till his children began to suffer: “This is enough for the food” or “Send them to public school” etc…

She was able to keep the family drama at bay, which started because of his stinginess and discrimination, when she decided to live by the intuitive intelligence she was born with; when she declared herself a clairvoyant, it started raining down customers. Things started to change when Rafael married into the family. Besides being a gentleman and generous, he showed his

love for Mercedita by buying her an apartment on Anacaona avenue, and on their first anniversary, he bought her an SUV; she was scared when driving it, since she wasn't used to navigating spaces with such a large vehicle. He also demonstrated his opulence with her family: he'd invite her parents to spend summers in the most exclusive hotels; he paid the tuition for her little brother, who had a knack for learning; and when he visited, he never showed up empty-handed; all in all, soon his skin seemed much lighter, his nose much thinner, and one of her brothers even told him he looked like Denzel Washington.

After seven months, Mercedita became pregnant and Polly forbade anyone from speaking derogatorily towards Black people: "I'm not going to let anyone speak about my grandkids like they are worthless. Judging someone based on their skin color is an injustice."

When the dark, beautiful baby girl was born, everyone absolutely adored her. Mercedita's siblings said she'd grow up to be Miss Dominican Republic, and her great aunts remarked "Bwah…there are lilies and dahlias, but she is the real bayahíbe rose."

Savannah, 2016

Savannah

The constant rainfall was forming grey sheets while the willows reached down like they were sweeping the ground. That day, I was paralyzed in my seat at a restaurant; I had no strength or desire to go to the cemetery to look for Peter Jacob's grave and put together the pieces of what really happened.

It was a small, quaint French bistro, the Euro-American style gave it a touch of chic. Two belle epoque seats bordered a miniscule table that had thin legs crowned by a red padded leather circle, where the waiters, one old and one young man, deposited cups of espresso or clear glasses half-full of red wine—meanwhile, customers waited for French onion soup or a quiche so they could go on with their day.

The polished glass display exhibited an incredible variety of desserts and their small portions made it hard for almost anyone to refuse. However, I did, remembering my youth and the extra weight, and finished my lunch, a short dark espresso with two packets of artificial sweetener.

The revolving door gave way to a young mixed couple, who looked like tourists. The woman with golden-brown skin had green eyes and blond hair that had been highlighted. A mid-calf chocolate-colored skirt harmonized with the draping, cream-colored silk sweater, while a light brown bag matched her mid-heeled sandals with leather straps. A flat platinum watch with a wide, finely woven band complimented the diamonds on her ears and finger, paired with a wedding band, a testament to her marital status. Her husband wore a similar ring and they seemed to match, only his clothes were white, yet flawless, which was exactly what that athletic

body needed. His face displayed dark eyes and perfect teeth that pulled you in from the first time you saw them.

They sat two tables from mine and started reading the menu, giving each other suggestions of what they were going to eat. The young waiter took a step towards them, but the old man signaled him over and took him behind the counter. While I was hoping the weather would clear up, an older gentleman, who was fat and white, arrived and sat at the table in the corner; ten minutes later he was savoring his food, shoveling it down with sips of wine and fistfuls of bread.

I asked for the bill once the rain stopped, and as I was leaving, nobody had gone to the Black couple's table, they had been waiting to order for more than thirty minutes.

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The leaves violently spun around in the wind, and the street looked like an impenetrable mass. A strong gust of wind almost knocked her over. There was a tornado warning, but she didn't want the vortexes and dust devils to stop her. She picked up the pace and stopped in front of the graveyard. A profound force that she had never felt before impeded her from continuing. It took all of her strength to get near that iron gate that was pushed half closed. She looked around and managed to see two old Black women leaving, covering small candles against their chests. The sky was filled with dark clouds pierced by flashes of lighting, the electrical bolts were barely heard, but they wove together, and each time denser and denser. She was frozen in front of the gate, her gaze fixed while her body wavered with the force of the strong wind. An immeasurable time passed. Then she recovered and decided not to enter… why?

She was walking between wooden houses that flew flags from the Civil War and displayed the names of the heroes that once lived there. The trees scraped against the ground and

she had to push the branches aside to keep going. The images of her papá, abuela, uncles, and sisters fused together like an explosion. She knew that her father had held on to his wounded heart, but what about the others? Maybe Robert did… But she never heard her sisters talking about that gringo and she knew he wasn't part of their histories, or their memories.

She felt calm and light, like nothing really mattered to her. From all of her misfortunes, a mild sadness came again, making her obsessive avocation with death dissipate; it made her feel good—as if this pang of sadness was an amulet, warding away genuine pain, which sometimes we feel and it derails our lives.

She asked herself why she had always been sad. Even when she cracked jokes or made witty comments, the desire to be alone led her to keep her distance, even when she was with others. The only truth within her was that coldness, that fear of change and living without reservations, which governed her life from the moment she realized happiness was fleeting and its price was far too high. She had accepted being unhappy in a world where lies, cheating, violence, and abuse… were part of everyday life, where nothing pure was certain.

She realized then, without a doubt, that she had lived by escaping her past, idealizing what she didn't have and turning it into memories—that were more what she dreamed than what had actually happened.

The first blows had surprised her: the death of her papá, her cheating husband, the children that had left her… till her misfortunes toughened her, and she learned to find the small things that made her happy—like watering the plant that belonged to her abuela or the sound of little birds' at dusk or the row of sugar ants that she associated with purity and intelligence. But the pain always bore its teeth like the guardian of hell, until she cried out to God, and He took pity on her battered life, which had been able to break the chains, fighting to stay within His

great love. And then she knew compassion, not the one she had always had, but the one He felt for her. At that moment, she surrendered in His arms, knowing she could make it to the end.

Savannah, 2016

The international news channel showed blurry cellphone images on the television screen. The only clear thing was the woman desperately shouting, “Don’t shoot him! Don’t shoot him!” The Black man lowered the car window and the white police officer shot him in the head.

Talking to myself

Radiant eyes unfurl until they form cascading ribbons that blind me. I make an ambitious attempt to read the letters formed by the seaweed, its endless strands braid and unfetter, making it impossible to marry the symbols. Suddenly, everything fades to black, and a tremble—barely noticeable—rises from the depths; and as it floats, the light brightens, allowing fragments of words to be seen, drowned screams to be heard, and outrageous laughs to spread violent anguish within me…

Blurred shadows can't trap the faces that sway, threaten, dodge, attack, and flee… Suddenly, a ray of light strikes the restless surface, piercing the dark circles that become brighter, letting clearly defined figures emerge, stopping my thoughts, and bringing me to peace.

I am now one with the water, one with the light, and one with Him…

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