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## Traumatic Continuities: Interlocking Violences in Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* (2002)

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### Abstract

This article examines the construction of a multifaceted collective memory through the main female protagonists in *Song of the Water Saints* (2002) by the Dominican American author Nelly Rosario. By bridging memory studies, Latin American studies, and Afro-Latinx studies, the book examines racial and gendered constructs, intergenerational struggles, US imperialism, and Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship to show the interconnected nature of memorial articulations for subaltern subjects. Through a literary close reading, this article dissects the lives of three generations of female characters—Graciela, her daughter Mercedes, and Graciela's great-granddaughter Leila—and how they challenge, reinforce, and suffer racialized, political, and gendered subjectivities. By examining intersectional and historical trauma simultaneously, this study contributes to the field of memory, Afro-Latinx, and Latin American studies by showing the muddled construct of memory for Dominicans and Dominican Americans.

**Keywords:** Afro-Latinx; race; memory; gender; Dominican Republic

### Resumen

Este artículo examina la construcción de una memoria colectiva multifacética a través de las protagonistas femeninas de *Song of the Water Saints* (2002) de la autora dominicana americana Nelly Rosario. En conversación con los estudios de la memoria, los estudios latinoamericanos y afro-latines, el artículo explora las construcciones raciales y de género, las luchas intergeneracionales, el imperialismo estadounidense y la dictadura de Rafael Trujillo para mostrar la construcción interconectada de memoria para sujetos subalternos. A través de un análisis literario, este artículo examina la vida de tres generaciones de personajes femeninos —Graciela, su hija Mercedes y la bisnieta de Graciela, Leila— y cómo desafían, refuerzan y sufren subjetividades raciales, políticas y de género. Al explorar simultáneamente el trauma interseccional e histórico, este estudio contribuye al campo de la memoria, los estudios afro-latine y latinoamericanos en mostrar la construcción interrelacionada de la memoria para los dominicanos y los dominicano americanos.

**Palabras claves:** afro-latine; raza; memoria; género; República Dominicana

After decades of US imperialism and the legacies of dictatorships, traumas in the Dominican Republic have evolved, not ended. Past events weigh heavily on Dominican American writers because of the collective past (and present) atrocities that have been ingrained in their lives. Gendered, racial, economic, and political forces are woven

together, revealing the interlocking legacies of colonial and imperial dynamics. The study of memory and trauma has long been defined in terms of the prevailing worldviews of Euro-American writers and thinkers (Rothberg 2008, 227–28; Craps 2013, 4). The dominance of these primarily white thinkers (Caruth 1996; Halbwachs [1925] 1980; Eyerman 2019), though generative, excludes the lived experience of minoritized peoples in the Americas. As Lucía Suárez (2006, 11, 11–12) has noted, “The task of remembering is a political one,” and diasporic writers refuse to let the past be silenced; they are forced to devise new ways of engaging with the violences that continue to haunt them in their new environments. The need to relay experiences that encompass—and decolonize—traumatic narratives is even more urgent with the transnational and ever-changing experience of diasporic writers. Therefore, the determination to tell a story is relevant to the works of the Dominican American writer Nelly Rosario, who derives her writing from the island of Hispaniola and a transnational cultural identity that constantly breaks ontological barriers.

Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* (2002) follows the gendered, racial, and political struggles of three generations of a Dominican American family. Focusing on the female lead characters—Graciela; her daughter, Mercedes; and her great-granddaughter, Leila—the novel shows the ways that both outside forces and internal struggles shape the lives of the three women. As is typical in the postmodernist novel, the various times, places, and points of view underscore the interlocking nature of the family’s past and present. Graciela is portrayed as a headstrong woman who is constantly trying to get away from her family and the social pressures of the village she lives in. Graciela contracts syphilis during one of her many escapes, a sickness that slowly consumes her body, forcing her to make amends with Mercedes before her own death. Unlike Graciela, Mercedes is described as mature for her age, albeit headstrong like her mother; she attempts to maintain a semblance of stability during her mother’s absences. She has a close relationship with her mother’s partner, Casimiro, with whom she lives while her mother is away. Mercedes marries a friend’s brother named Andrés and eventually, in her seventies, moves to New York with him and some of her family in search of better economic opportunities. Finally, there is Leila, Mercedes’s granddaughter, who was born in the Dominican Republic but grew up in New York. She is being raised by Mercedes and Andrés and an uncle because her mother, Amalfi, who plays a minor role in the novel, has stayed on the island. Leila’s story focuses on her coming-of-age journey, in which she repeats mistakes made previously by her great-grandmother while also forging her own definition of self as a Latina in the United States. These three characters’ traumatic memories grapple with the subjugation of the US occupation of the Dominican Republic, the suffering under Trujillo’s regime, and (neo) colonial political dynamics while simultaneously negotiating racial and gendered norms.

Scholarship on Rosario’s novel explores the links between memory, trauma, and the female body, along with the impact on Dominican subjectivity in a transnational context (Figueroa-Vásquez 2020; Hey-Colón 2015; Zamora 2017). These works focus on the inherent fluidity of traumatic events and the transgenerational continuity in female bodies. I add to the existing scholarship by showing how the novel depicts a multifaceted understanding of collective memory for Dominican Americans by linking the island’s social constructs and political events to US imperial aftermaths and racially gendered norms. I reveal how the overlapping of traumas makes them inseparable for Dominicans in the diaspora through the characters’ articulation of multiplicities within traumatic pasts and presents, bringing together their experiences into a multivalent whole. Sociopolitical traumas on the island, in conjunction with transnational racial and gendered norms, emerge as concurrent memorial iterations. For the characters in this novel, it is impossible to parse out where a gendered oppression starts and a political trauma begins, making indistinguishable precisely which traumatic event is being memorialized. Additionally, memorial articulations are both multidirectional and transnational, as seen in the way the trauma

continues with Graciela's daughter, Mercedes, and great-granddaughter, Leila. Mercedes and Leila expose the various ways trauma challenges directional modes and sites of resistance, thus contesting memory's intergenerational flow. Therefore, rather than settling on a stagnant, pluralistic definition of trauma, the novel reveals that collective memory for Dominican Americans is complicated by the fact they are living through a traumatic experience while simultaneously attempting to reconcile the past.

Furthermore, I juxtapose various interdisciplinary theorizations from memory studies, Africana studies, and Latin American and Latinx studies to provide a more inclusive articulation of memory for Dominican Americans. I take from Juliet Hooker's (2017, 14) work on the ways juxtaposition, rather than comparison, can help dissect hemispheric connections and move away from setting North America and Latin America in contrast to each other. By engaging with various scholars in multiple fields, I provide a more inclusive representation of collective memory for Dominicans and Dominican Americans who are at the intersection of Latinx, Black, and Caribbean subjectivities. Thus, my analysis is informed by Black and Afro-Latinx thinkers such as Dixia Ramírez (2018), Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2014), and Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2002), who reveal the ways that Black females constantly resist and break white hegemonic power constructs. In particular, my analysis is enlightened by Saidiya Hartman's (2002) "The Time of Slavery" to show how past and present oppressions—such as constructions of race, gendered expectations, and political violence—are interwoven, becoming indistinguishable from one another and thus continually being reengaged and redefined in the collective memory. Hartman's theorization helps us understand how Graciela, Mercedes, and Leila are affected by past events, never fully being able to escape their family's legacy as they navigate economic precarity and political oppressions that force international immigration.

Finally, I bridge the disciplinary divide by also engaging Caribbean studies and memory studies together. David Scott's (2014) "aftermaths" and Ann Laura Stoler's (2013) "ruins" inform my understanding of the colonial legacies that disrupt time and underscore the continuities in memory constructions. Scott's and Stoler's theorizations reveal the unfinished nature of colonial dynamics in temporal and material ways. Similarly, Michael Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory, in which he reveals how representations of trauma disrupt the linear and confined structures of memory, influences my analysis. In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Rothberg (2009) argues that a collective memory is influenced by many different traumatic forces that affect people who have no relation to the initial trauma, such as how Leila still lives the legacy of Trujillo's regime once in the United States. Rothberg explains the polymorphous nature of memory that moves beyond a singular directional mode, providing a more nuanced and complex understanding of memory constructs. It is with these thinkers that I reveal the complicated, continuously developing, and interconnected collective memory that defines the Dominican American experience.

### Layers of colonial trauma

At the intersection of gender, race, and coloniality, Graciela's body maneuvers these various subjectivities, constantly being victimized by and also challenging these different traumatic experiences. Graciela is reminiscent of what Dixia Ramírez (2018) calls "colonial phantoms," where colonial legacies combined with Black erasure throughout history merge to reveal Dominican national constructs in the diaspora and on the island. These phantoms challenge binary paradigms of race imposed on minoritized peoples, demonstrating the incongruous continuities of racial, gendered, and colonial vestiges in the present. Graciela, through her bodily abuse and protest, demonstrates the conflicting (and continuous) nature of trauma for Dominicans. Throughout the novel, Graciela

exemplifies bodily contestations, using her body to seek self-understanding even as it is also exploited by those around her. Her body and its challenges to the social order are one piece of the multifaceted structure of memory in that they emerge in the lived experience of the Black female body's gendered and racialized oppressions, shifting and moving as they resist and succumb to patriarchal hierarchies of power. Memory is inherently multidirectional, even as hegemonic powers try to confine it (Rothberg 2009, 12). The racialized and gendered traumas on Graciela's body reveal the multidirectional nature of memory, which constantly combats the hegemonic limits of singular memorial articulations. Black females contest notions of space and place because they challenge the silence forced on them through patriarchal standards (McKittrick 2006, xvi–xvii). Geography, or the production of space, place, and location both materially and imaginatively, is not fixed but in process, influencing the subjects within it and being influenced by those subjects simultaneously (McKittrick 2006, x–xii). Black women's geographies—or their knowledges, negotiations, and experiences—reveal the layered oppressions within a society where Black females have a diminished role because of the sexual violence they suffered as captive humans. The sexual exploitation and encounters are precisely the geographic negotiations of Graciela's maneuvers, where her actions are dictated by and contest the space she inhabits.

Graciela's bodily contestations are seen from the opening scene of the book, in which Graciela and her partner, Silvio, encounter a “yanqui” named Peter West, who asks them to pose for intimate nude pictures to be made into postcards for American and other foreign tourists. Peter West is a reflection of the US economic involvement, and eventual military, occupation of the Dominican Republic in the early part of the twentieth century. Following its victory in the Spanish–American War, the US government began to see the Caribbean broadly as a major economic and military interest. Part of the broader Monroe Doctrine that expelled European control from Latin America and sought greater influence in the region, US involvement in the Dominican Republic fused economic and political interests on the island. Even as the United States controlled Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and several other spots in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic became a site of growing economic benefit for US interests. Seeing a revolving door of political and economic instability along with the menacing possibility of a European military invasion, the United States became directly involved in the island nation in 1901 to protect US commercial ties (Moya Pons 2010, 282). Moreover, this agreement initiated the entwining relationship between the two countries that propped up various presidents and political factions, ending with the political collapse and subsequent military occupation that began in 1916 (Moya Pons 2010, 320). West's character is a harbinger of events to come, foreshadowing the perpetual political, economic, and gendered entanglements that unfold in the novel.

With this historical background in mind, Peter West's actions exemplify the way Western powers have consumed the Caribbean as a legacy of slavery, the slave trade, colonialism, and American imperialism. West lures the young couple into a warehouse, where he dangles the possibility of making a few dollars and exploits their precarious economic realities. Inside the warehouse, they are engulfed by an intense heat that penetrates both Silvio and Graciela, emphasizing the power imbalance of the moment. It is not a sexual heat but one that straddles a line between racial oppression and sexual exploitation by Peter West. For West, the pair are props in a broader game of capitalist exploitation that is constantly changing and arranging their bodies to get a perfect shot. Hey-Colón (2015, 16) argues that the image creates a “fantasized indigenous past” in which myths emerge regarding “creative and intellectual thought on the island.” The heat makes their bodies too shiny, so he powders them, like women getting ready for a ball, and then, realizing they have become too white, “he use[s], instead, mud from the previous day's rain” (Rosario 2003, 11). West then proceeds to grab Silvio's penis and inserts his thumb into the “humid wet mound between Graciela's thighs” as they both sit still, stunned and

paralyzed by the situation. West runs to the camera to capture the “fire” in their expression. After taking the picture, West gives them their money, only for Silvio to keep Graciela’s half, highlighting once more the patriarchal structures that always privilege men over women. West takes advantage of Graciela’s body for material gain in ways that linger insidiously and cannot be fully resolved.

Peter West’s exploitation underscores the idealization imposed by the Western gaze on the Caribbean, as he constantly pokes and prods them, shaping them into an image not of their own making. The gaze is used to consume them like objects, albeit slightly removed from the objectification of enslaved bodies, for economic gain. As Omaris Zamora (2017, 6) notes, “AfroLatina women’s bodies and their relationship with other bodies are consistently being read as products of consumption by the structure of white supremacy.” This capitalist gain is yet another layer of the continuation of trauma seen in this specific context through West’s exploitation of two Black lives. Capitalism is known to be a social structure that creates racial and cultural hierarchies in the name of privileging Eurocentric ways of being. Capitalism has been structured globally to center Europeans and Europeanness, or *lo europeo*, regardless of where the social order in question is located (Quijano 2000, 208). Capitalism and economic exploitation inherently stem from the legacy of colonialism and the way the world was structured under European colonial rule in the Americas. Thus, this legacy creates an ongoing trauma on Black lives in the Americas. In one layer, the sexual and gendered exploitation of these two bodies for the pleasure of others is exposed; in another, we see economic exploitation as their bodies are forced into this space so the photographer can make a buck; and in the third, it becomes clear that the political traumas of US imperialism all come together in a way that cannot be untangled.

While Peter West serves as a metaphor for US economic imperialism, Eli Cavalier serves as a haunting for the European colonial powers on the island. Graciela contracts syphilis from Eli Cavalier, a European traveler she meets on a train on one of her trips. Graciela’s relationship with Eli is reminiscent of Amalia Cabezas’s (2009, 12) “economies of desire,” where sex work is a remnant of colonial and imperial power structures that extract an eroticized and racialized capital on the island. Eli is representative of the broader colonial abuses of the Caribbean, even being from an ambiguous location called “Germanyfrance” that evokes the indistinguishability of European powers. Echoing the abuse by Peter West, Eli takes her to a brothel in order to devour her body, treating her like an object to be consumed, cleansing her body with herbs, and then sniffing her like “a beast on a hunt” (Rosario 2003, 79). He rubs leaves and herbs on her vagina like “seasoning for [his] meal” (Rosario 2003, 78), parading her around the room and examining her body. During intercourse Graciela tries to enjoy the sex by “grinding herself against the bed to own some pleasure” (Rosario 2003, 79), a failed attempt at taking control of her body. But he overpowers her until she cannot move, dictating what pleasures she is allowed to have. Eli’s sexual feast mirrors the way the West has traditionally exploited the Caribbean through sex and money—linking sexual desire with unrestrained economic appetite regarding Graciela’s Black body.

Graciela’s syphilis muddles the directionality of memorial articulations by ebbing and flowing and morphing like the colors of a kaleidoscope. As Rothberg (2009, 4) notes, “Memory nonetheless captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side and the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past.” The syphilis haunts Graciela, marking her with a scarlet letter, a physical manifestation of her defiance of the social norms and a reminder of her unidentified internal void. Syphilis marks her body and maps her broader ills and past traumas. Rather than being seen as the illness of star-crossed lovers who slowly die because of their inability to fully reveal their love, syphilis is understood to be a sickness based on sexual deviance that marks its victims with gashes on their hands and other physical and mental symptoms. Already a social outcast in her community for not fulfilling her designated roles, Graciela is consumed by syphilis

over the course of several years. Her slow decline and weakened immune system become what Donna Haraway (1991, 204) describes as “a map drawn to draw recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialects of western biopolitics.” The immune system is a place that is used to relay a message, and Graciela’s immune system, her syphilis diagnosis, and her subsequent decline serve as a remapping of the slow deterioration of her existence.

The disease becomes a twofold problem for her because, on the one hand, it is she who decides to leave the comfort of her family and the stability of the community to seek adventure elsewhere, and on the other hand, the way she acquires the disease is also reflective of how Black females are used and exploited in Western societies. Graciela suffers colonial-gendered traumas that further blur the various other oppressions. As Graciela’s syphilis-induced bodily decline ebbs and flows, paralleling the way past traumas are constantly present, the US regime remains a direct, tangible oppression. Tales of the US presence haunt Graciela, and she “fold[s] these stories into the back of her memory when she [sneaks] about the city outskirts with Silvio” (Rosario 2003, 13). The United States is both a persistent presence and a distant foe that becomes an all-encompassing menace encircling her body while also being the cause of constant political instability. Even before contracting syphilis from Eli, Graciela is warned by La Pola, the madam of the brothel, “Those yanquis, they’re the ones who come bad with the syphilis” (Rosario 2003, 77), ominously foreshadowing not only Graciela’s sickness but also the penetrating nature of the US presence.

As Graciela’s body is used and abused by the powers that surround her, however, her body’s spatial encounters inherently combat these structures. According to Katherine McKittrick (2006, xiv), the complexities of geographies as power relations along the various delineations in space and time “expose domination as a visible spatial project that organizes, names, and sees social difference (such as black femininity) and determines *where* social orders happen.” The social order in this society is defined by the sexual exploitation and the various violations of Graciela’s body. Yet even within this power structure, Graciela constantly challenges the societal norms that demand that she marry, maintain a relationship with a man, and organize a household effectively. These social expectations are another layer of the past trauma, one that forces Graciela into perpetual failure because she is seen as being “socially different.” She follows her sexual desires, carrying out a sort of existential exploration by taking on several lovers from the cane fields, leaving home for long stretches at a time, and generally becoming a defiant figure in the village. Her body becomes a manifestation of the challenges to society that stem from her internal malaise. Graciela never finds her present state satisfying and is seized by a constant desire for something more, something else, and something better, but she is never able to achieve it. She never really finds what she seeks: herself.

On numerous occasions Graciela abruptly leaves to search for the pleasure she craves, disrupting the chaste social order that admonishes her sexual desires. The pleasure she seeks is not purely carnal but a drive to find a loss she herself is not fully sure about. Her body is the site of pleasure, at once resisting and succumbing to social pressures in both racial and gendered terms. Graciela’s excursions echo enslaved people’s secret rendezvous with lovers and meetings with family members in the American antebellum South as a way to maintain a sense of community and combat the “kinlessness” that they experienced. According to Saidiya Hartman (1997, 69), these moments of pleasure where enslaved people would meet in secret gave enslaved people some agency by allowing them to resist the power structures that defined them as property. Graciela uses these moments to define her own autonomy, whether in going away to the capital, traveling with Casimiro to the other side of the island he made her believe was Puerto Rico, or simply leaving at the end of her days as she is consumed by her illness. Graciela constantly disrupts the social norms that control her body. In these moments of escape, she attempts to find her truth but fails

in her search, always reverting back to the village that suffocates her. It is because of these roles that Graciela desires an erotic freedom that she fails to achieve with the men around her (Figueroa-Vásquez 2020, 52). To Hartman (1997, 58), because formerly enslaved people performed their Blackness in what she calls “a pained body,” “pleasure is central to the mechanisms of identification and recognition that discredit the claims of pain but also to those that produce a sense of possibility—redress, emancipation, transformation, and networks of affiliation under the pressure of domination and utter lack of autonomy.” The tensions in the dual reality of pleasure and pain reveal the inherent tension in the Black female body. The spiritual connection between her interior desires and external oppressions reveals how traumas go beyond her body and yet are linked to it. Her body becomes the place where her internal suffering manifests itself in public view.

Moreover, Graciela’s vagina is the bridge that links these external social pressures with her internal colonial haunting. Black female sexuality is a double-edged sword, signifying not only sexual agency and empowerment but also sexual promiscuity and deviancy (Hill Collins 2004, 133–134). Graciela’s female genitals are also a double-edged sword, the link between the two traumas, being described as “folds of flesh she never before thought existed where so much pain and pleasure had passed” (Rosario 2003, 141). The narrative voice continues, “All her life she knew the place by feels and smell, never equating it with the rubbery layers of gray-brown and pink. She could not distinguish healthy tissue from the sickly tissue she suspected, and with alarm concluded the gray-brown areas were dying” (Rosario 2003, 141–142). This inability to distinguish healthy skin from sick skin, along with the commingling of pain and pleasure, makes the interiority and exteriority of the Black female body blur together. Graciela’s genitals are the portal between the outside world that causes so much pain and her interior world, keeping it in constant turmoil. Her vagina is a hybrid vessel of past traumas, not only her own but also those of her forebears. The body is the threshold between one’s interiority and the exteriority that society tries to control (Butler 1990, 131–132). The various orifices of the body used for sexual pleasure—the anus, the vagina, and the mouth—evoke the inability of the social order to completely close off the body. Graciela’s body, and in particular her vagina, stays open figuratively and literally, exposing her internal strife to society while also defying the standards that oppress her.

Graciela’s body is transformed and ravaged by her life experiences, and her body is the map that reveals its journey. Her body deteriorates with the syphilis that has infected it from within and is constantly battered by social expectations from without. Her whole life leading up to her death is a never-ending stream of abuses. Her mother, Mai, constantly tries to control what she sees as a rebellious daughter by hitting Graciela, pulling her hair, or making her kneel on grains of rice; at the brothel where Eli takes her, she is cut in the face by one of the sex workers; and she suffers physical attacks at the hands of some townswomen. These and other moments of abuse take their toll on her body, and by the time she returns home to die, their ravages are clearly visible: “At twenty-seven, Graciela was now a small copper woman with a map of her world on her face. A tiny keloid where the smooth skin of her cheekbone had been torn by the bone-soup woman wriggled when she smiled. Her eyes had lost their luster, but gained depth in the bargain. Faint splotches spread like continents on her skin” (Rosario 2003, 167). Her body is battered by twenty-seven years of abuse from internal struggles and social oppressions. Unable to fully maintain the barrier between the exterior and the interior and constantly battling the past and the present, she finds that the traumas eventually become indistinguishable from one another. The syphilis comes from the outside but attacks her from within, and her sexual exploits, social pressures, and feelings of guilt are impacts from the external society but cause her internalized pain. Ultimately, the overlapping traumas are so muddled that her body collapses under the pressure and succumbs to her existential predicament.

### Racial-political continuities

Colonial, racial, and political traumas fuse together, blurring the continuation of the violence in similar, yet new, iterations throughout the novel. This political, economic, military, and gendered interweaving of the United States and the Dominican Republic sets the context for Graciela's interaction with the soldiers who come to her parent's property searching for a cache of rum. After her excursion with Silvio, Graciela returns to find US soldiers in her home aggressively pulling her mother's hair while the older woman writhes in pain. The soldier turns to Graciela and asks through the interpreter where her father keeps the pistols. As she replies that he stores only cane rum, she smells the rum on his breath and sees it in his bloodshot eyes. The soldier then "clamp[s] Graciela's nose and [holds] it until there [i]s blood, which he wipe[s] against her blouse" (Rosario 2003, 15). The clamping of the nose is not just a violent act against Graciela but also a form of racial disciplining as part of colonial past that seeks to punish Black lives (Figueroa-Vásquez 2020, 50). By forcefully holding her nose, the soldier is punishing Graciela for a feature that points to her Blackness. Afterward the soldier sucks the smear of blood that is left on his finger, rinsing his hand in their clean water barrel before he leaves. The soldiers engulf Graciela through the various senses: seeing her mother's pain, experiencing pain in her nose, smelling the rum, having her body controlled. With the soldier holding her nose, Graciela feels the direct violence of the occupation piercing her body and leaving her with little control over her bodily functions. Her body is again the site of trauma as it is abused by the soldier, adding to the layers of political abuse she already bears. The US invasion was predicated on an idea of white racial superiority and the inferiority of African-descendant populations within political nation building (Mayes 2014, 96). But these efforts came at a cost; as part of this stabilization effort, the government raised money by collecting taxes, and major revenue came from alcohol and other products. The collection of alcohol taxes was centrally based in the capital city, drawing much protest in the country (Mayes 2014, 323). Thus, within the novel, economic interests fuse into political acts and exert a racial-gendered violence on Graciela.

The "yanquis" eventually exit the island and leave the Dominicans with "a corps of locals well trained in the tactics of repression" (Rosario 2003, 123), a hangover effect of the US occupation and an indication that the trauma of the eight-year occupation will not end with their departure. Their violence is transformed, not removed, and it morphs into the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, leader of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Several references are made to the end of the US occupation and the beginning of the Trujillo regime, cementing the continuity inherent in the Dominican people's trauma. While the political traumas, particularly that of Trujillo, are secondary and muted rather than a dominant feature, this troubled past affects all three characters, but in particular Mercedes. The link between a racial discourse, Trujillo's violence, and Mercedes in the novel further underscores the multidirectionality of trauma as Mercedes perpetuates problematic tropes and political stances.

Racial tensions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti reveal the constantly smoldering embers of racial conflict on the island. Much like the political and economic tensions, the racial ones are subdued, providing only faint evidence of the latent tensions that exist on and off the island. The few instances involving Haitians lurk just under the surface in the village, and anti-Haitianism presents itself in ways that subtly bubble up for the characters, slowly burning and spontaneously appearing like other past traumas. Trauma has an inherent latency by which the experience of being traumatized is not because of the event but rather through forgetting. One needs to attempt to forget, and not be able to, in order to experience trauma (Caruth 1996, 17). This latency of memory mirrors how Dominican Americans manage to reveal the lingering nature of the trauma that occurred during the US occupation and Trujillo's regime. These memories are fused



together, and Graciela, Mercedes, and Leila are unable to distinguish one atrocious event from another, even if they always know that the traumas exist. In the end, identifying which event is articulated does not matter as much as understanding that these past and present traumas are together, and forever, linked.

The latent nature of the violence imposed on Haitians mirrors the interior conflicts of the Dominican people in conjunction with the global oppression of Haiti. Lorgia García Peña (2016) contests the us-against-them narrative that dominates scholarship on Haitian-Dominican tensions and asserts that the relationship between the two nations is much more nuanced than the strict dichotomies of anti-Haitian and anti-Black ideologies on the island. García Peña (2016, 9–10) explains how the Haitian-Dominican divide is a product and legacy of European colonialism, US imperialism, and Trujillo nationalism. These racial dynamics are profoundly muddled, and in the novel they echo the community's internal struggle to pacify its own racial malaise. As gender does, Haiti and issues of race form part of a broader colonial legacy by US imperialist desires and anti-Black rhetoric that persisted on the island long after the US departure (Ramírez 2018, 12–13). Race becomes a multivalent trauma constantly connected to past violences, and its memory is repeatedly reinventing itself through new hierarchies of power. As Rothberg (2009, 16) comments, "Collective memory is multilayered both because it is highly mediated and because individuals and groups play an active role in rearticulating memory, if never with complete consciousness or unimpeded agency." In the novel, social and individual tensions tug against each other, revealing the racial strain.

These racial pressures are further exposed when the townspeople are at a festival celebrating carnival, the children, who have dressed up in costumes and some in blackface, trail away from the adults. Graciela becomes suspicious as to why the children are gone and goes after them, only to find a group of children, Mercedes among them, engaging in physical violence and beating a girl who is in blackface. As the children yell, "Beat the Haitian, beat the Haitian" (Rosario 2003, 103), Graciela manages to stop Mercedes, only to have the other children start beating Graciela. After Casimiro breaks through and stops the fight, the parents begin to blame Graciela for her poor parenting of Mercedes, another vestige of Graciela's tenuous relationship with the townsfolk. The child whom Mercedes was beating is a Dominican wearing blackface, underscoring the internal racial strife on the island and revealing Dominicans and Haitians to be two sides of the same globally colonized world. The blackface undercuts the ability to see the difference between the two nations, fusing them together racially. In his essay "Afrodominicano por elección/negro por nacimiento," the Dominican thinker and writer Blas Jiménez (2008) emphasizes the importance of embracing Black Haitian heritage within the Dominican reality and self-reflecting as an Afro-Dominican. He notes that the global racist system has led to the existence of anti-Haitianism on the island today. The Haitian-Dominican divide, as he sees it, is weak at best, and yet it festers in the novel as a remnant of past traumas. The global system ends up negating not only Black lives but also Black ways of knowing. This negation is folded into the other traumas experienced, causing the characters' haunted realities. Ultimately these localized tensions muddle the distinction between a traumatic present and internal conflicts that persist for Black subjects.

These racial tensions are exasperated by Trujillo's regime. During his thirty-year stint as ruler, Trujillo focused on his governing agenda, stamping out any viable opposition and linking the economic success of the country to his personal enrichment (Derby 2009, 3). Trujillo manipulated and morphed already-established gender and racial norms to serve his own purposes and used the press, the church, and the military to control his people. One of the major features of his regime was that he controlled the past, present, and future of the state to maintain power and manipulate the discourse around several social aspects in the country (Wiarda 1968, 105). Within the novel, references to Trujillo's violence come in fits and starts, appearing as a ghostly but very real violent factor in the lives of these

characters. Trujillo is presented as a series of facts that intangibly anchor his oppression. For instance, he comes to power after having won by “more votes than there were eligible voters” (Rosario 2003, 180), and he requires that his image be placed in all homes. Mercedes becomes the dutiful citizen, obeying the racist discourses that Trujillo perpetuates, the opposite of Graciela, who constantly challenges social expectations.

Trujillo and Haiti are intricately connected. After decades of Haitian settlements in the western part of the country near the Dajabón River, Trujillo wanted to expel the thousands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans who lived in the region. Frank Moya Pons (2010, 368) has explained that the Haitians resettled parts of the regions in such large numbers that Haitian currency was used, and the territory “functioned like an extension of Haiti.” For centuries Haitians and Dominicans coexisted in the region—Trujillo did not like the muddled border and ordered the killing of Haitians after a stump speech at the border in October 1937 (Paulino 2016, 61). Only those who fled or were protected by the sugar-mill owners survived. This mass killing, later known as the Parsley massacre, created a large international outcry, including rebukes from the United States and other Latin American countries. Rumors began to spread that Haitians were being killed for their inability to properly pronounce the word *perejil*, or “parsley,” in Spanish. Other rumors abound, but this tale became the touchstone of the 1937 genocide. Following the genocide, the region was repopulated and economically developed through a process called “Dominicanization” that reinforced Trujillo’s claim to be the savior of Catholic and Hispanic cultural traditions (Moya Pons 2010, 369–370). Economic, racial, and imperial legacies lie at the heart of this event and in the novel are epitomized by Mercedes’s willingness to fall in line, fearing “she would find herself one day as Mai had long ago, in the time of the yanquis, with a pistol barrel scratching her hair” (Rosario 2003, 180). Mercedes’s fake adoration for Trujillo further underscores her ambivalent and self-interested relationship with her leader, continuing a colonial trauma into Trujillo’s reign.

At the age of twenty, Mercedes begins to take control of a local kiosk that sells household items and food. Mustafá, the owner of the shop, departs for a time and leaves Mercedes and her husband, Andrés, in charge. She takes great pride in maintaining the stand, and townspeople frequent it to buy goods and stay up to date with news and gossip. Speaking to one of the patrons, a Dominican neighbor named Old Man Desiderio who is giving a “pornographic description” of the killing on the Dajabón, Mercedes almost welcomes the genocide, telling Desiderio that “the Haitians have been polluting us with their language, their superstitions, their sweat, for too long” (Rosario 2003, 181). As Desiderio continues to recount the events, Mercedes becomes angrier at him, disgusted by his “dark skin” and “broad features” (Rosario 2003, 182). She tells him he is lucky to be able to pronounce the *r* in *parsley*, or “your blood would have blended with that river just as well” (Rosario 2003, 182). Her violent words echo the physical violence of the event and reflect the depth of her racist rhetoric. This rhetoric in her adulthood echoes the beating she gave the little girl dressed in blackface as a child. The text leaves a lot to be filled in about the Trujillato, yet it highlights the more heinous crimes. The impact of his regime’s ties to the United States is clear, yet with varying degrees of disclosure. This murky connection reflects the inconsistency in memory formation and the way it is, even if not strictly definable, constantly present.

### Traumas on repeat

As the novel follows the family to the United States, the political traumas and bodily exploitations that the characters experience are transmitted from generation to generation. The intergenerational transfer of trauma underscores how Dominican Americans experience the trauma of their forebears, echoing Marianne Hirsch’s (2012)

concept of postmemory, in which the children of Holocaust survivors still live the trauma of their parents through visual products in the context of Argentina. To Hirsch, the transfer of trauma among generations is complicated because it is not the actual memory or experience of trauma that is transferred but rather its lingering silences and vestiges. Trauma still shapes the way subjects engage with the world, even as they are never fully connected to the traumatic event itself. The trauma Graciela experiences is passed on through her actions and words to Mercedes and then Leila. While Dominican Americans relive the past through the discourse of their parents and grandparents, however, the systemic structure that caused the US occupation of Hispaniola, the Trujillato, and gender violence continues in the economic and forced migration from the Dominican Republic. In *Song of the Water Saints*, the same system causes the pain in Graciela's body and pushes the family to move to the United States in search of better opportunities, only to find disappointment and despair draped in American dreams. Dominican Americans, then, not only live their own present traumas but also carry the weight of all the traumas of their forebears, as seen through the various connections between Graciela, Mercedes, and Leila.

Mercedes's birth accentuates multiple directions of memory. She was born during a storm in October, which parallels her mother's internal struggles and the external forces arrayed to oppress her body. The storm reflects the uncontrolled ravages of childbirth on Graciela's body and the physical discomfort she experiences in having a child. The future unsettles her, and although the pregnancy has been a calm one, childbirth is what troubles Graciela, "being the first time she was afraid of what jumped inside of her" (Rosario 2003, 34). In her postpartum delirium, Graciela decided to call the baby Mercedes; the wet nurse, Ñá Nurca, notes, "¿This little hurricane with the name of mercy?" (Rosario 2003, 35). But whom is Mercedes giving mercy to or receiving mercy from? Mercedes gives mercy to Graciela, taking on the continued traumas even when her mother struggles with the legacy of the past. Mercedes's character's disruption of a linear traumatic transference allows for a rethinking of the way trauma is constructed for Dominican Americans. In "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," Denise Ferreira da Silva (2014) argues for what she calls a Black feminist poethics that allows the decolonization of Blackness by moving away from a universalist understanding of the world. To Ferreira da Silva, Western philosophies are based on categorizations that are structured in a way that situates Blackness as an object rather than a thought, creating an ontological other. One of the ways these categorizations unfold on Blackness is through constructs of time and space. To move away from these time-driven categorizations, Ferreira da Silva (2014, 91) suggests thinking of Blackness in a way that allows an existence beyond space-time, one that "resists dissolving any attempts to reduce what exists—anyone and everything—to the register of the object, the other, and the commodity." Mercedes's character challenges this temporality and traumatic flow by not fully being the receiver or the direct transferrer of the legacy of trauma but instead straddling an in-between space that connects both generations, Graciela's and Leila's. She, however, also suffers in many ways the legacy of the past traumas. Mercedes disrupts the directionality of trauma in this context and provides a multidirectionality that "does not subscribe to a simple pluralism, either" (Rothberg 2009, 16). The at-once rupture and continuity in Mercedes underscores the complicated ways traumas continue for Dominican Americans.

Mercedes is also independent-minded and does not necessarily fit in within the society she engages. Much like her mother, she uses the community to her benefit. Although she is independent minded, she chooses to stay in the Dominican Republic when Graciela leaves and forges her own path with Andrés. Mercedes is connected to but not defined by her cultural past, disrupting the linearity in memorial articulations and asserting agency in the Black female body that is often denied. Her arithmetic skills enable her to own the town's kiosk, connecting her to capitalist structures and giving her economic stability. The relationship between Mercedes and her daughter, Amalfi, underscores how memory

articulation cannot be essentialized, nor can intergenerational memory be seen as moving in just one direction; this further destabilizes memory for Dominicans. The skipping of a generation highlights the various ways these traumas manifest in various bodies and the various forms they take in a family and a society.

Mercedes's haunting appears in alternative ways than for her mother and grandmother, yet it is not any less linked to the continued oppressions of the past that the other women suffered from. Rather than connecting the various traumas as independent events that follow one another in chronological order, Mercedes muddles these interactions, forming part of an echo in the novel, occupying a liminal space in which she is not quite a central figure, but nor is she a secondary one. During Graciela's death, the thirst that has tormented her is transferred in her final moments to Mercedes, pointing to the continuity of the trauma. However, unlike her mother, who constantly battles the society that she lives in, Mercedes is aware of the power dynamics in the village. She is hyperconscious of the stares she gets from men, even from Mustafá, who sees her as his daughter. The townspeople find the way he looks at her inappropriate, and rumors begin to spread about her frequent visits to his kiosk. The gossip makes Graciela worry that her own sexual exploitations are transferring onto her daughter as Mercedes grows older. Mercedes's body, like Leila's and Graciela's, becomes an object of the town's oppressive gaze, and Mercedes is painfully aware of that fact. Her body is the site of these desires, following the legacy inherited from her mother that she shuns to follow her own path. Realizing that she must marry to maintain a certain social standing, she weighs which man would make a good spouse. She finds that all the men around her bore her or are too old, reflecting her independent spirit. Mercedes's relationship with a man is not about carnal desires, as it had been for Graciela, but rather about finding a partner. She eventually falls in love with Andrés, who wins her over because he sees her and hears her, a departure from her relationship to the other townspeople. She defines her social role on her own terms and paves her own way, distinct from her mother's destiny.

Although postmemory is typically thought of as a linear transfer of trauma from one generation to the next, Graciela, Mercedes, and Leila's trauma transference challenges this notion by skipping generations and shifting the way trauma is transmitted to the different female characters. Rather than seeing the linear trajectory of trauma as a construct that privileges white, Western ways of knowing, Mercedes's character shatters this notion by serving as a link between Graciela and Leila's intergenerational trauma. Economic issues play a haunting role again. Beginning in 1962, after the death of Trujillo, the Dominican Republic experienced a massive exodus from the island. As a result of political freedoms that allowed travel along with declining economic conditions on the island, Dominicans were able to begin migrating to the United States (Torres-Saillant and Hernandez 1998, 29–31). In the 1980s, economic problems created by President Balaguer's administration further contributed to a sharp increase in Dominican migration to Puerto Rico and New York (Moya Pons 2010, 435). Well into the 1990s, economic policies set up by the United States to bolster US interests on the island encouraged outward migration. The exodus of Dominicans fractured families and caused economic hardships that maintained the colonial trauma of the past, albeit transformed in the present.

These economic woes cause a cultural loss and traumatic continuity for Leila and her mother. Amalfi. Economic precarity and cultural dislocation merge with Amalfi's character. The haunting of US imperial and neoliberal economic policies reifies these traumas. The diaspora's displacement is a continued colonial existence that moves beyond the colonial-postcolonial paradigm that often defines Caribbean studies by opening new (yet similar) power relations (Martínez-San Miguel 2014, 7–8). Too scared to join her family in New York, Amalfi has a tense, if not nonexistent, relationship with Leila, who does not understand why her mother did not come with them. Amalfi's relationship with her daughter is mirrored in the ambiguous financial choices she has made. Straddling both

progress and stagnation, she represents a lost existence that cannot extricate herself from the colonial and imperial malaise. Amalfi struggles to explain to Leila why she could never summon the courage to leave and join the rest of the family. During a family visit to the Dominican Republic in 1998, Amalfi tries to make amends with Leila, who is visibly angry at her mother. Explaining her regret and contemplating both Leila's growth and her own existence, she states, "Time doesn't forgive. Here I am, making T-shirts that get sold right back to me, making cakes from sugar that we make and isn't even ours" (Rosario 2003, 220). Economic factors are a constant threat to the family, and her explanation to Leila shows the perpetual presence that traumatic experiences have on the present. Trauma is no longer just a past event; the family is grappling with loss and fractures of the colonial reality. The generational disconnect between Amalfi and Leila reveals how trauma is passed down collectively rather than directly from mother to daughter.

Whereas Mercedes differs from her mother, Leila carries her grandmother's troubled legacy. As a character that both is underdeveloped and takes up only a small portion of the novel, Leila is connected to Graciela through their shared bodily desires, reflecting the persistent nature of the structures of slavery, which disrupts temporal singularity in memory studies. Saidiya Hartman examines the legacy of slavery in African Americans' everyday consciousness and the material vestiges of slavery they experience in the form of poverty, crime, and the pathologization of Blackness. In her essay "The Time of Slavery," Hartman (2002) puts into contestation the issue of history and time, as slavery has taken on a different form for Black subjects today. Speaking on African Americans' sojourns to Africa, Hartman criticizes both the way slavery is presented in modern society and the monetization of sites of memory. She notes that the dispossession of these sites is what connects Black subjects to the past events. Material and legal subjugation today "account for the living presence of slavery, and as well for the redress proffered by tourism. (Hartman 2002, 766). This living presence of history that Hartman applied to the trauma that Leila is articulating. Being racialized and an immigrant in the US context produces a multilayered articulation that combines both the racial subjugation of one's home country and the second-class status and racism of the United States. Hartman underscores how remembering slavery, mourning the loss of a past, and attempting to recuperate a current ontological reality are not decipherable. Graciela, Mercedes, and Leila are linked through the constant presence of past traumas and ongoing social and political traumas that weigh them down in different but interlocking ways. For the women of this novel, there has been no systemic effort (be it national, regional, hemispheric, or international) to reconcile the issues of the past, allowing the system to constantly adapt and morph into new iterations and atrocities. Whether through racist national formations and negations (e.g., Trujillo's expulsion of Haitians), social and economic exclusion, mass incarceration, or—as in the case of these female characters—US occupation and the Trujillo regime, the oppression and subjugation of Black bodies in these systems do not allow them to forget but force them to constantly relive trauma.

Young Leila is exploring her body and her independence under the watchful eye of her grandmother, who attempts to save her from the mistakes many young adults make. The grandmother laments the fact that they are in New York, commenting on how the youths grow up differently than back on the island. Feeling misunderstood by Mercedes, Leila seeks advice and finds it in a spiritual moment with her great-grandmother, who appears to her. As Hartman (2002, 759) notes, "The 'time of slavery' negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression; then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead." In their conversation with Graciela, Leila declares, "I wanna be a woman" (Rosario 2003, 203), asserting her independence and pointing to her desire to control her own body on her own terms. Graciela shows her that to become a woman she must let go of her body. Recognizing that Leila is not ready, Graciela tells her that she needs to leave her body in order to eventually "bleed [her] heart for truth" (Rosario 2003, 203).

Omaris Zamora (2017, 13) argues that though Graciela's advice is violent, it is used to transfer knowledge from one woman to another so as to "tap into a space of intimacy for the sake of liberation." As Zamora asserts that there exists a transfer of knowledge between Graciela's and Leila's bodies, I also see this as a continuation of past and present traumas. The continuation muddles the singular event often attributed to trauma and shows the continuity between racialized and gendered bodies. This connection resembles Jacqui Alexander's call for a collectivization of Black women in the diaspora and the need both to recognize the inherent differences in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American experiences and to acknowledge the connections. To Alexander (2005, 270–272), these legacies of slavery that affect all women in the diaspora must be recognized in order to decolonize imperial power relations. The chapter in which this scene unfolds is not given a year, a feature that anchors other events throughout the text. The chapter's title, "Circles," alludes to the cyclical nature of Leila's exploration and the ever-repeating essence of Dominican Americans' traumas. Rather than Leila's journey being that of a troubled inner-city youth, her body manifests how the legacy of past traumas is not, and cannot be, fully resolved.

With this advice, Leila goes on to explore her sexuality with a married neighbor named Miguel, whom she pursues to find the woman she is seeking in herself. Like Graciela, Leila is depicted as strong willed, and she asserts her sexuality partly to rebel against the confines of her family's gaze but also to define her womanhood. Sex, pleasure, and the unknown build a sense that echoes Graciela's exploration while maintaining Leila's experience. Miguel and Leila meet in the basement of their building, hiding from the watchful observation of Mercedes and Ismael, Leila's uncle. As Miguel feels Leila's adolescent body, "She moan[s], afraid and excited the superintendent of the building [will] catch them and trot upstairs to tell her grandparents" (Rosario 2003, 210). These paradoxical emotions are paired with Miguel's exploration of her body when she winces at the pleasure and thinks through her relationship. She is very unimpressed with her presexual encounter but has set in her head that she needs it in order to understand her body. Leila's relationship with Miguel echoes Martínez-San Miguel's (2014, 165) notion of *sexile*, where complimentary and simultaneous displacements occur in desire. To Martínez-San Miguel the reification of colonial power relations within colonized or former colonized peoples through sexual desires breaks the linearity of hierarchical power relations. Martínez-San Miguel (2014, 166) proposes an alternative construction in which "the negotiation with that complicit other that does not share the same object of desire—yet who is willing to temporarily negate himself-herself for the enjoyment of the other." A colonial negation occurs with sexual desire, but once it is fulfilled, colonized peoples return to the "real or potential nation." Leila continues her sexual exploration and leaves the family for a while, staying at her friend's home. She meets Miguel in a hotel room during a night out with friends. The interaction goes from problematic sexual advances by Miguel to Leila's commitment to the sexual experience to her eventual dissatisfaction with it all: "Leila remembered once rushing up to a silver dollar on the pavement that turned out to be a circle of spittle" (Rosario 2003, 232). It is after this experience that Leila returns home, longing for the idealized pleasant nature of everyday life with her family. She returns to her nation or home. In the end, the novel finishes in very much the same way it began: with a woman exploring her sexual desires only to be disappointed by the outcome. Yet both women grow from these encounters, repeating the cycles again.

## Conclusion

*Song of the Water Saints* complicates the linear understanding of memory articulation by revealing the multiplicity of traumatic memory of Dominican Americans. The characters in Rosario's novel are victimized by the heteropatriarchal structures and white system

that impose expectations on female bodies that say they must be chaste, domestic, and hypersexualized, violating their bodies. These social structures are combined with the intimately linked political systems that are the direct legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and localized dictatorships. The novel serves as a case study to further understand the interlocking, transnational, and intergenerational traumas on Dominican Americans that cannot be defined by one event, in one generation, or in one national context. The interconnected nature of the various oppressions reveals a multifaceted memory articulation that underscores the various subjugations perpetrated by heteropatriarchal and white supremacist systems.

Graciela's, Mercedes's, and Leila's experiences show how various forms of oppression sit on and inside the body, perpetuating existential harm for generations to come. The continuation of traumas for these Black females underscores how the fact that the existing oppressions of the past have not ended. Yet the three women are not passive characters in the oppression that surrounds them and demonstrate an agency that disrupts the too-often-linear understanding of the way trauma has an impact on bodies. The racialized, gendered, economic, and political traumas that are challenged by the three characters demonstrate the interconnected realities and legacies of global systems of oppression that continue to haunt the Caribbean and its diaspora today. The women's stories reveal both horizontal and temporal layers of oppression and the broad impact of those oppressions. The novel's imagination allows for rearticulations of the multifaceted nature of these bodily subjugations that attempt to decolonize understandings of memory.

These memory articulations open up new understandings of memory that are linked to structures of oppression. Understanding the interlocking and changing reality of these oppressions reveals the structural inequities that persist today. It is only then that we can begin to decolonize our understanding of these bodily subjugations in a way that does not replicate past and present oppressions. For Afro-Latinx writers in the United States, the urgency of writing about past and present struggles is more salient today than ever. Political movements across the hemispheres have shed light on the brutal reality that Black lives encounter as they try to live their daily lives. The writing of this quotidian brutality brings us a step closer to healing and decolonizing the ways that the trauma inflicted on Black lives is represented and understood.

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