Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found.” Luke 15:22

In his now canonical study *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard idealizes his childhood home and recalls that “...the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6). He fondly remembers that “centers of boredom, centers of solitude, centers of daydream group together to constitute the oneiric house which is more lasting than the scattered memories of your birthplace” (17). His recollections, as other critics such as Julian Olivares have noted in comparing Bachelard’s “felicitous space” with the images of “home” of such writers as Sandra Cisneros, are obviously those of an upper-class white male who has never had to do “female housework” nor be confined to the house because of his race or his gender (233).

What is a Latina writer to do, then, in depicting “home” when this “poetic space” of
“comfort, security, tranquility, esteem” (Olivares 236) postulated by Bachelard is lacking and when for her, an apartment or a house has been prosaic, overcrowded, confining and often even dangerous? How does the minority author or Latina writer reconfigure “home” to include multiple experiences and perceptions and to portray the dialectic of “living here and wishing to leave for there”? (Olivares 236).

In her preface to This Bridge We Call Home, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that "Home’ can be unsafe and dangerous because it bears the likelihood of intimacy and thus thinner boundaries. Staying ‘home’ and not venturing out from our own group comes from woundedness, and stagnates our growth” (3). Doreen Massey, in Space, Place and Gender, alludes to “postmodern geographies of fragmentation” and argues that if “space is conceptualized in terms of four-dimensional ‘space-time’ and…as taking the form not of some abstract dimension but of the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations at all geographical scales…then ‘place’ can be reconceptualized too.” (162, 168). bell hooks, in Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics, states that “home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers for difference” (148). Anaïs Nin, discusses “Coming from what the social welfare calls a broken home, being uprooted, knowing what poverty is, coming to a country whose language I didn’t know—all these things taught me simply to put my roots in the self. As I said, I became’a lady with transportable roots’” (17). Other Latina writers such as the Dominican Loida Maritza Pérez are incorporating some of the feminized definitions above while establishing new paradigms for the idea of “home.” Perez uses the Biblical allegory of the prodigal son to encompass both the homes that
Latinas leave and the homes to which they return. In an interview, Pérez states that “the book that has had the greatest impact [on her] is the Bible for its inherent contradictions and fascinating tales.” (Penguin Readers Guide 9). It is no wonder, then, that the story from Luke serves as the structural underpinning of her first novel and that she arrives at a definition of home as “…not located on any map but nevertheless preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home” (137).

Lyn F. Di Iorio, in her as yet unpublished dissertation, *Killing Spanish: Doubles, Dead Mothers and Other Allegories of Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Caribbean Identity*, argues that many Latino/a authors use allegory since “allegory is a trope that emphasizes division and fragmentation” (7) and allegory is appropriate in Latino narratives since “broken unity results from separation with an idealized island of origin; its signs are either madness or miscegenation or both” (4). Using an accepted definition of allegory as” the construction, or interpretation, of a work of literature in which a more concrete sense refers to an ‘other,’ abstract level of meaning (7), Di Iorio has found that allegory in Latino Caribbean literature “generates the following characteristics….archetypal characters whose family stories take precedence, or at least conflict with, their roles as protagonists in individualist narratives (3). Certainly this is initially the case in *Geographies of Home*.

When called back from college after eighteen months away by the “voice [that] had been waking her with news of what was taking place at home,” ” a disembodied voice,” (2) “a voice hounding her as her mother’s had at home” (3), a voice that “reassured Iliana of her own existence and kept her rooted” (4), a voice, in other words,
that indicates that she shares the powers of Spiritism or Santería with her mother and
grandmother, Iliana becomes enmeshed in the turbulent lives of her siblings and almost
loses herself in her family’s turmoil. While on the surface, the narrative seems to give
primacy to the story of Iliana who leaves for college at a place recognized to be Cornell
and who, like the prodigal son in Luke, returns home to be welcomed by her parents and
envied by her sister, the novel also has other allegorical prodigal daughters in the oldest
child Rebecca and the mother of the clan, Aurelia. The three of them in some way have
“squandered” their inheritance and must return “home” to reclaim it and to re-enter into
communion with their family and their heritage in order to be complete, even though they
leave again. It could conceivably be argued that the mother Aurelia is indeed the central
figure in this tale of leavetaking and return, of forgetting and remembering, of
abandoning and retrieving, in spite of her seemingly secondary role. It is her story that
seems to encapsulate a workable definition of home for the author.

From the beginning, Iliana is presented as a disruption in the family. The fourteen
children from nineteen pregnancies had been paired: two boys, two girls, every two
years…until Iliana María. Born three years after her sisters Marina and Beatriz, she was
supposed to have been a boy. Throughout the text, her features are always described as
“masculine”---her body with its “meager breasts, long arms and massive hands, thin legs
and knobby knees” (276)---her stride, her choice of clothes, but mainly it is her
independence that evokes masculinity: “She was as indifferent as Tico, as confident
about her opinions as Gabriel, as volatile as Caleb. Overall, she behaved more like her
brothers and shared few of the personality traits of her sisters” (277). Di Iorio
postulates: “this rebellion against the repressive rules of Latino patriarchy carries the
unfortunate consequence of a *de facto* assimilation into a U.S. culture that requires women to take on masculine qualities to be successful” (138).

Under her parents’ ever watchful eyes in her strict Seventh Day Adventist Brooklyn home where children slept two or three to a bed, Iliana retreated into her books and academic success even from the beginning: “Excelling in classes became her immediate goal, school her venue for escape” (127). She is described as “observing her family and immersing herself in books” (43). Home was a patriarchal stronghold in an incomprehensible American landscape in which Aurelia, the mother, had lost all confidence and self-respect and had “deteriorated to a skeletal eighty-one pounds” (24); it was a place in which no disrespect could ever be shown to “Papito” who reacted violently when challenged. Home was where Iliana perceived that the brother and sisters closest to her in age were somehow favored, where they got toys and treats that she was denied. But it was also a place of strength, as illustrated by a black and white photograph of her parents who “neither smiled nor frowned but gazed unflinchingly at the camera as if prepared to confront whatever challenges life might throw their way” (44). It was also a place that “mitigated painful memories with images of the entire family---their faces crinkled with joy and laughter---piling into a train on their way to Coney Island or proudly gathered in church as Aurelia received a bouquet of flowers and a brooch inscribed 'Mother of the Year’” (92). The house from which Iliana sets out for school represents a lifetime of scrimping and saving by her parents and five years of hard labor that “transformed the house into a home…the comfort of their old age, the anchor in their children’s lives” (22). In spite of guilt and tremendous misgivings, Iliana begs to be the first female in the family to attend college and notes that “only by leaving had she, on
occasion, acquired the confidence to express her opinion, and she feared that by returning, she would fall silent again” (10). Home, or the idea of home, at its center, leads to a feeling of ambivalence.

The house to which Iliana is called back by the supernatural maternal voices “looks nothing like what Iliana remembered” (27). It has now been painted a canary yellow and surrounded by a white iron fence with a gate leading to the stoop. She finds it “festive” and “deceptively new” (27). As with the prodigal son in the Biblical story, Iliana is welcomed by her mother and father and rejected by the sister who had remained at home, now lost in the depths of madness. Marina’s resentment is palpable: she slams the door in her sister’s face. The mother, however, hugs her daughter and “had anticipated the dishes she most craved: fried, sweet plantains and a stew of cow’s feet, honeycomb tripe, garbanzos and carrots served over yucca and rice” (33), a Caribbean equivalent of the fatted calf. In spite of the meal, family members throw barbed comments Iliana’s way: her father makes fun of her, saying “Listen to our ‘jucated daughter!” (49) and reminds her, “You were the one who said you’d stay, and you left as soon as you got the chance” (50). Later, however, in a discussion about the abused older sister Rebecca, Aurelia too lashes out at Iliana: “And here I thought they’d taught you nothing in that school. But you’ve obviously learned a lot. You can even predict your sister’s future. Tell me….What else did you learn, besides how to turn your back on your own family?” (65) and even “Why so silent now? I’m giving you the chance to talk, to teach your mother who knows nothing” (65). Meanwhile Marina confronts her with “…you think you’re such hot shit!…You always have! Reading stupid books, talking to everyone like you were better, acting like what we had wasn’t good enough for you!
Well, I’ve got news for you! We don’t need you here!” (39). Di Iorio notes that “Iliana feels torn---between her role as daughter of an impoverished working-class Dominican family and her newly hatched, still inchoate identity as a privileged member of the American middle-class intelligentsia” (139). When Iliana confesses to her brother Tico, “I don’t know if I can deal, Tico. I really don’t,” he answers “I wondered why you came back. I would have stayed away” (37). (Parenthetically, it could be noted that the brothers of this family don’t seem to struggle with the pulls of home nearly as much.)

Marina, as the daughter who remained at home, has been forced to deal with her father’s strict religion, the self-hatred of being non-white in the United States, and the aftermath of rejection. In her basement room, a location Bachelard would associate with the “’dark entity’ of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces” (18), Marina hallucinates, rants and plots. Iliana at first wonders if she is a “religious fanatic or genuinely insane” (45). Marina has conjured a dream rapist, a black man who externalizes her own preference for white skin, has set fire to important documents in the law office where she worked, has tried to kill herself several times, has burned the kitchen of her parents’ home after imagining spiders crawling there, has exhibited ecstatic possession in church and, has tried to remove mulatto color from her own flesh with Brillo pads and Lysol. Her descent into madness is predictable, as Di Iorio sees it, since it is “expressive of resentment as well as a self-destructive impulse” (28) and Marina is certainly resentful of her father’s strict rules, of Beatriz, the lighter-skinned beautiful sister who left home never to return, and of Iliana’s freedom to move about in the world: “Resentment seeped into Marina’s soul. She glanced at her youngest sister who had fled home only to return and be embraced as she herself, who had remained, had
never been” (101). It was expected that Marina, like her older sisters, would marry and have children but the only men she wanted…"a white man or at least a light-skinned Hispanic like herself” (17)…continually eluded her. Marina has attempted to be the model child, as symbolized by her efforts to become a model in Manhattan, and has failed miserably. Marina subverts her role as dutiful daughter through her madness. Gilbert and Gubar, in their seminal text, pointed out that “madness is a space where women characters need not continue to perform the roles imposed upon them” (88).

In the chilling climax of the novel, Marina’s resentment at the family’s welcoming of Iliana, the prodigal daughter, upon her return from exercising a type of masculine freedom in the world leads to a repeated rape. The first time, while looking for the penis she is sure her sister must possess, Marina exults: “I almost had it!… I almost had it in my hand!” (284) Marina, still convinced that Iliana is really a man, attacks her once again to find out:

Hatred was visible in Marina’s eyes: raw, unadulterated hatred that confirmed those times Iliana had detected glimmers of it but had dismissed it, times when her sister had said, “You’re so beautiful, so smart, so cool.” Hatred that now conveyed: You think you’re so special, so goddamn smart and cute! Let’s see what you think of yourself when I’m through! This hatred paralyzed Iliana as the blankets were again stripped from her body, her legs violently pried apart. This hatred pierced her infinitely deeper than the hand thrust between her thighs. (289)
Even though the family has been determined to keep Marina at home and away from Anglo medicine and institutions, this final assault causes them to reexamine their decision.

Painfully difficult to read are the episodes dealing with another prodigal daughter, Rebecca, the oldest of the seven female children. For years, Rebecca had carried the weight of her family, preceding them to the United States, saving money for the parents and her siblings to come north, getting green cards for every one and contributing half of her own earnings to the upkeep of her parents’ household. She feels unappreciated and asks, “And where had it gotten her? What thanks had she received?” (62) Rebecca first left home for the U.S. and then left once again to marry an older man, Samuel, who abused her and abandoned her “for a woman able to provide him with the residency papers he had assumed Rebecca possessed” (54-5). Her next disastrous marriage is to Pasión with his highly symbolic name and this relationship, that produces three children, follows the classic textbook case of sexual abuse as outlined by Lenore E. Walker in *The Victimization of Women*: “Rather than constant or random occurrences of battering, there is a definite cycle that is repeated over a period of time…The three phases are: the tension building phase, the explosion or acute battering incident, and the calm, loving respite” (146). In spite of the horrendous living situation Pasión forces upon Rebecca and her three children…they live in a ramshackle house in which the third floor has been converted into a chicken coop in order to provide Pasión with ties to his agricultural background in the Dominican Republic, in which the stairways are littered with used furniture and appliances dragged off the street, and in which the squalid living quarters are usually without electricity, running water and heat because Pasión refuses to pay the
bills….Rebecca exists for the third phase of her abusive relationship in which Pasión promises to reform and makes love to her with the passion his name suggests. As Walker states: “The battered woman chooses to believe that the behavior she sees during phase three signifies what her man is really like. She identifies the ‘good man’ with the man she loves” (152). Pasión, of course, does not stay in the house with Rebecca and the children but lives with his mistress since the chickens and the filth exacerbate his asthma. On one of her many escapes…first to find a job which was then prohibited by her husband since it “shamed” him by proving he could not provide for his family, and then to her mother’s house…Rebecca is asked: “Then why don’t you leave?” She answers, “Because it’s my home…Pasión and the children are all I have” (60). However, even though Rebecca continually returns to her husband, by the end of the novel, the grandparents have demanded that the three undernourished and traumatized grandchildren with the evocative names of Esperanza (hope), Rubén, and Soledad (solitude) remain with them. To the ambivalence brought to a definition of “home” by Iliana, to the resentment felt by Marina at being trapped at home, Rebecca adds the dimension of feeling unnoticed at home for her sacrifices and unappreciated for her efforts, even the failed ones, to do the right thing. Home, then, is also a mirror in which we want to see ourselves reflected. Rebecca’s epiphany finally comes after Pasión’s death:

…she concede[s] that she had depended on his abuse to be the ongoing and conspicuous reason for her despair, the catchall for her failures and disappointments, the attribute of their marriage which was to have exonerated her of both blame and responsibility for her own and her
children’s lives…Yet even what she could have dutifully offered him as a wife---unconditional love, a well-kept house, nourishing and homemade meals---she had given grudgingly or not at all. (304)

Aurelia’s matriarchal story, in spite of the supposed primacy given to Iliana as narrator, most closely seems to develop an all-inclusive transnational definition of home based on returning as a prodigal daughter. The home she leaves when she marries “Papito” was poor but “something had flourished from within which had enabled her to greet each day rather than cringe from it in dread. With bare feet planted on familiar ground, she had trusted her perceptions. Yet assaulted by the unfamiliar and surrounded by hard concrete and looming buildings, she had become as vulnerable as even the Trujillo regime had failed to make her feel” (23). In Brooklyn, she is “conscious of something missing in the present---something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children” (23). Aurelia had severed all connections with her mother and had spent her adult life trying to deny the “ability to perceive the invisible” that she had inherited from her: “She wanted no more of such a legacy…For this reason she had converted to her husband’s religion and had shared with him little of her past” (134). The strict Adventist faith that seemed to sustain her husband did little to nourish Aurelia and she feels powerless praying to God to help her abused daughter Rebecca, her mad daughter Marina and her absent daughter Iliana. The one moment of her day in which she feels connected to something greater than herself is early in the morning when she feeds the pigeons at her window, a contact with nature that ties her to her island roots.
Faced with the seemingly insurmountable problems of her family, Aurelia finally makes her own prodigal daughter journey “home” to Santería when confronted with yet another of Marina’s suicide attempts and the condition of her grandchildren. At Marina’s bedside, Aurelia makes a lifesaver of her own voice…the same voice that had summoned Iliana back home… and finally breaks the taboo of talking about the past and of showing affection:

Maybe I should’ve told you then and there how much I cared. Maybe I should have assured you how much I wanted to be able to provide you with everything you’d need. Or maybe it would have been best had I explained that your longing would not have ceased had I and your father been rich enough to buy you all you wanted. But the truth is that I had not discovered this even for myself, and that I too believed that if we lived in a bigger house, in a better neighborhood or at least wore better clothes, we would think better of ourselves and the world would too…What I’m trying to say, m’ja, is that I don’t think Papito or I will ever be able to provide you with everything you need. I don’t even know if you’ll be able to obtain it all yourself. But if you hang on long enough, you’ll discover that there are other things that make staying alive worthwhile, things that have nothing to do with money, not even with anybody else. (143)

Marina’s return from the abyss reinforces Aurelia’s newfound belief in her inherited powers.

Realizing that Rebecca will once again return to Pasión and continue to put the three children in harm’s way, Aurelia finally decides to call upon her rusty powers to
intervene. Asking Papito to buy live chickens that she will prepare for the family reunion Christmas dinner, Aurelia enacts a ritual of Santería that makes her feel powerful. She focuses all her thoughts on Pasión and wills him to go to the third floor chicken coop at Rebecca’s. While she systematically scalds and plucks the chickens in her solitary kitchen… “her hands moving at a dizzying speed, the air thickening with dust and feathers that choked Pasión…” (255), she initiates a ceremony that will cause the chickens in the coop to stir up more dust, feces and feathers, to knock the inhaler out of Pasión’s hands, to peck at his eyes, his face, his wrists until he dies of an asthma attack. Once finished, she sees that “pristine flakes” have started to fall, seeming to bless her actions. Fresh from her victory over Pasión, and becoming increasingly aware of what she had inherited from her mother but had ignored, Aurelia feels a further sense of accomplishment:

She was for the first time aware of the extent of her powers as well as firm in her decision to continue employing them in whatever ways might benefit her family. Euphoric with these newfound powers and surrounded by her many children and their offspring, she felt like a tree who had grown roots deep into the earth and could not be easily felled. This feeling of invincibility permeated her entire being, lending her a self-assurance she had previously not possessed and persuading her that she could from then on avert misfortune and keep her children safe. (265) Aurelia’s return to her mother’s legacy marks her return “home.” Her mother, aptly named “Bienvenida” or “Welcome” had given her everything she had needed for a sense of home but Aurelia had trashed these symbolically charged objects to adopt her husband’s religion and to blend into her American community. The sack with the parting
gifts from Aurelia’s last visit to the Santera’s shack included a “fistful of earth to which we return to nourish those who follow” (134), “an earthen jug corked to contain water. To remind you that in our blood we carry the power of the sea” (134), “a clear piece of glass reflecting rainbow colors. Because beauty exists in the most unlikely places” (135), “a wishbone, clean and smooth; a scroll of bark, an owl’s feather. To quell your fear of darkness and teach your spirit that it can soar.” (135). Another gift Aurelia had abandoned was the family memorial quilt: “because the future can hurt if you deny the past. Because I want you never to forget. Because, as the youngest of my children, it is for you to sew me in” (132). Finally, Aurelia regrets “having discarded her mother’s gifts, including the quilt and shawl, at the base of a palm tree beside the road. She regretted as well the many years she had spent running from her heritage as if the past had the power to transform her into a pillar of salt as it had Lot’s wife” (137).

Contrasted with Aurelia’s newfound power after returning “home” to her mother’s religion is Papito’s impotency in dealing with family crises. In this matrilineal text, Papito is doubly unnamed since we never learn the surname of the family and he is referred to only by the name of his archetypal role, “Papito.” Even that is in the dear or diminutive form, somehow diminishing him from being called “Padre” or even “Papá.” His sense of powerlessness originates from having lived under Trujillo and having been unable to rescue his first love, Anabelle, from a hurricane. These lead to his conversion from Catholicism to the stricter Adventist faith: “What had appealed to him about Adventist doctrine was its specificity in distinguishing right from wrong. In a country where both had shifted according to a tyrant’s whims and little had offered relief or hope, religion had granted him salvation, unmediated access to the divine and steadfast rules by
which to live” (149). Later, in raising his own family, “Wary lest his daughters wind up whores and his sons in jail, he had wielded religion as sword and shield in their defense” (146). Yet, in spite of this, after Marina’s suicide attempt, we find him curled in the fetal position on his bed, leaning on Aurelia for support and weeping at his own helplessness; after confronting Pasión about his abuse of Rebecca and threatening him with a candy bar in his pocket that Pasión assumes is a pistol, we find him facing his own cowardice, something “he had long suspected about himself. ‘Did you think I was such a coward that I’d let you go on doing as you pleased? Did you think I’d tuck my tail between my legs and let you set foot inside my house?’” (240). Instead of leaving Pasión to die of an asthma attack, Papito throws him his inhaler and returns the wallet he had garnered to buy food for his grandchildren. As a deacon in the Greater Brooklyn Seventh Day Adventist Church, it was Papito’s duty to make worshippers feel welcome yet he makes his own daughters, Marina and Iliana, feel like outcasts in the congregation. His patriarchal religion and the role he gives it within the house cause his children to want to leave. Even after Iliana has been brutalized by her sister, it is her father who drives her away once more. Coming home late, she sees a light in the living room and hears her father in the hallway. She requests the traditional “Bendición” but receives instead a blow to her face: “Shameless hussy! Whore!” (313). On this occasion and the only one in the novel, Aurelia steps in between her husband and her daughter, yelling “Oh my God! You have gone mad!” (313). Still a virgin after eighteen months on her own, Iliana is stung by her father’s remark and realizes that she can no longer live in the same house.

How, then, to summarize the idea of “home” as presented by these three prodigal daughters? Aurelia, Rebecca, and by extension, her children, and Iliana all return home,
but it is to a mother’s house, a matriarchal abode. They represent the African diaspora taking root in the Caribbean, the Caribbean diaspora making a place for itself in the United States and a diaspora of young Latinos assimilating into the American mainstream but looking back to their origins. The idea of “home” of these daughters must represent a Dominican neighborhood in Brooklyn when one is studying in upstate New York, the island nation of the Dominican Republic when one is in the United States and a conceptualization of home that incorporates Africa and its belief systems when one is in the Dominican Republic. Like a series of Chinese boxes, each idea of home is contained within the other, or like the cover of the novel designed by Betty Lew, each previous home is visible through the door of the room currently occupied. “Home,” as in the Biblical allegory, embodies both the idea of leaving and returning but adds on the necessity of perhaps leaving again…or, as Olivares stated, “the idea of living here and wishing to leave for there”(236). For Loida Maritza Pérez, the idea of “home” is certainly not the place of daydreaming remembered by Bachelard but is filled with ambiguity for Iliana, ambivalence for Rebecca and, in the central image, portability for Aurelia. This concept of Nin’s “transportable roots” is something that is finally transmitted to Iliana as she decides to return to school following Marina’s attack and her father’s outburst: “everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home” (321).

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