



Voices
from the
Gaps

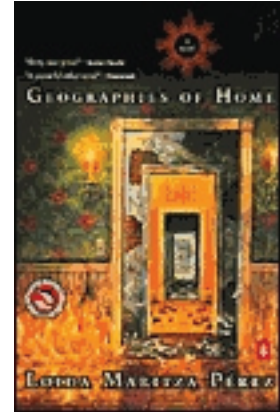
Geographies of Home by Loida Maritza Perez

Loida Maritza Perez fearlessly depicts the realities of abuse and mental and physical suffering of an immigrant Dominican-American family in her first novel, *Geographies of Home*. Perez's simple language yet descriptive detail makes the reader feel immersed within this intricate family's struggles and triumphs.

Ultimately Perez's story is about family, and her novel focuses on five main family members. The author carefully shifts character perspectives to give the reader the most engaging point of view for each alteration in the family dynamic. This is a bold storytelling choice, and a lesser writer could have risked one-dimensional and underdeveloped characters by constantly changing character viewpoints, but each of Perez's characters are complex, believable and unique.

Perez's distinctive and captivating characters are the driving force of this novel. Iliana, the story's central protagonist, is a student returning home from college after she is informed that her family is teetering dangerously close to destruction. Iliana quickly becomes the reader's most reliable source of information firstly because she was both removed from the family's problems and is exposed to the extent of the family's deterioration at the same time as the reader. Iliana also has attributes and a mental state that most readers can relate to, whereas many of Perez's other characters have extremely complicated inner dialogues.

Iliana's first re-encounter with her family is her mentally ill sister, Marina, not recognizing her when she greets her at the door, and from this point on Iliana continually faces more evidence of her family's mental and physical decay; one sister has disappeared, another is being physically abused by her husband and in turn abuses her own children, and her religiously conservative parents are losing their faith.



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Reviewed by Danielle Allen



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Iliana quickly begins dealing with the guilt of her absence while her family has been falling apart, but finds herself conflicted on whether to escape back to school or face the possibility of being pulled further into her family's state of corrosion. Iliana deals with family problems which almost every reader can relate to, such as favoritism, sibling rivalry and acceptance, and also problems more distinctive to her own family such as abuse, poverty, and a difficult migration to the United States. She also faces an inner struggle of self-identity which is boldly examined. Constantly teased that she is ugly and resembles a drag queen, Iliana must decide whether to believe these harassers or to form her own sense of self.

Although Iliana is the central protagonist, the character who is arguably the most interesting is her sister Marina. Suffering from a mental breakdown brought about by a violent rape, Marina's actions and perspective are both unsettling and intriguing. In one horrifying scene, Marina believes her rapist appears in her room, and the reader realizes the emotional damage of the rape through her, "Her instinct was to run. Yet she could barely breathe, much less move. And she knew that if she screamed her parents would claim that she was crazy, that no one else was there. Eyes adjusting to the dark, she cursed them for not heeding her warnings. They had betrayed her. Having doubted evil, they had welcomed it into their home. Now there it stood: the embodiment of her worst fears. She had known it would arrive. But not so soon, not for her, not as the man who'd raped her. She recognized the shape of his body and its stench-an odor of rotting greens she had been incapable of forgetting" (16). Burning imagined spiders off the walls and constantly replaying the rape in her mind (although the experience is very physical to Marina), through Marina the reader discovers the residue of sexual assault, both mental and physical, to the darkest extent of suicide.

Each of Perez's characters find themselves caught between two cultures and facing all the trials of immigrant life after settling in New York. An immigrant from the Dominican Republic herself, in one particularly beautiful chapter Perez takes the reader back in the Dominican Republic with Papito, the father of the household, before he was married and had children. In one section Papito sees Anabelle, the woman he is determined to marry, walking in a violent storm and follows her, "Heart pounding with alarm, he turned to follow with his eyes the apparition posing as Annabelle. Unaware of his presence, she stumbled toward the sea. Her tangled hair whipped her face. Her mud-smearred dress gaped with a rip from her shoulders to just above her waist. The strip of fabric fluttered behind her, lending her the appearance of one who had lost a wing and was attempting to make do with the remaining appendage too water-logged to propel her off the ground" (156). Recounting his first love, Papito's flashback gives us a vivid sense of the homeland that haunts his family as well as a deeper understanding of Papito's obsessive protectiveness over his daughters.



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Perez creates characters who would not be classically likeable such as a father who beats his children, a schizophrenic, and a superstitious semi-psychic mother, and makes the reader, if not have a high regard for them, at least listen to their stories. It is these characters who may make the reader slightly disappointed in the ending of the novel, which does not completely follow through with their stories. Reaching the last page of the novel, the reader may wonder, where is the rest, and what happened to so-and-so, and feel somewhat dissatisfied. This abrupt ending makes the reader feel like the characters are still continuing, we are just left out of the story. This reflects an accurate sense of what a family is, which is a constantly changing and does not have clean-cut endings.

Perez has many untidy ends which often feels more like a collection of short stories than a novel. These unexplained questions and issues such as abuse, murder, racism, and self-hatred feel more honest without having a complete resolution or happy ending. It is these unresolved themes and characters that make Perez's novel haunt the reader long after they finish that last page.