RITUALS OF RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY LATINO FICTION: QUEERING MASCULINITY, MATRIMONY, AND MOTHERHOOD IN THE WORKS OF JUNOT DÍAZ AND NICHOLASA MOHR

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A THESIS

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This thesis examines the processes of gendering and sexing as seen in the short fiction of contemporary Latino authors Junot Díaz and Nicholasa Mohr, and focuses especially on how the ideological constructions of gender and sexuality, particularly those of machismo, maternity, and marriage, interact with notions of nationality, ethnicity, race, and class. The stories in Díaz’s *Drown* and Mohr’s *Rituals of Survival* and *In Nueva York* illuminate the mechanics of these ongoing, complex ideological processes, revealing the crucial role gendering and sexing play in forming and regulating a working-class, U.S. Latino body. The characters of these stories negotiate stark dichotomies and rigid gender roles by subverting some and embracing others, thus revealing that there are multiple masculinities and femininities.

Keywords: adultery, homosexuality, immigrant, Latino, machismo, motherhood
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the gendering and sexing of the Latino body as seen in the works of the Latino authors Junot Díaz and Nicholasa Mohr. Both authors spend a significant amount of time considering sexualities that are deviant or transgress the accepted “normative” heterosexuality, and the potential sexual violence often attached to these transgressions. The characters of these stories also spend significant time negotiating accepted forms of masculinity and femininity—particularly machismo ideology and the virgin/whore dichotomy. I will be looking at specific institutions and arenas of sex/gender: machismo and homosexuality, maternity, and marriage and adultery. Each of these constructions is a site of ideological contestations not only of sex and gender, but also of race, class, culture, and nationality. Díaz and Mohr's stories illuminate the mechanics of these ongoing, complex ideological processes, revealing the crucial role gendering and sexing play in forming and regulating a U.S. Latino body.

I have chosen to focus on Junot Díaz and Nicholasa Mohr because, despite their generational and circumstantial differences, they each write with a similar transnational, working-class perspective. They both write short story clusters set in the Latino enclaves of urban, poverty-stricken locations; Mohr’s work is set primarily in New York City, while Díaz’s stories often take place throughout New Jersey. Both authors also directly tackle issues of sex and gender. While Díaz is gaining ever-increasing critical acclaim and attention, however, Mohr has been curiously understudied throughout her literary
Reminiscent of Piri Thomas’s writing in tackling issues of race, class, and violence, Díaz’s work has attracted a great deal of critical acclaim in recent years. Diaz was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and raised in New Jersey. Díaz’s collection of short stories *Drown* received glowing reviews and with the recent acclaim of his first novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, his work has received increasing attention and a wider appeal and audience. He studied at both Rutgers and Cornell Universities and currently teaches at MIT, and his work has been published in several well-known journals including *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *African Voices*. *Drown* is Díaz’s first edited collection. Aside from the Pulitzer Prize, Diaz has also received several other awards and fellowships including the Guggenheim, the 2002 Pen/Malamud Award, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Despite this growing critical attention, however, relatively little work has been done on the gender and queer aspects of his work.

On the other hand, Mohr has received very little critical attention despite her influence on Latino literature. Mohr is a Nuyorican writer, and one of the earliest Puerto Rican women writing about mainland Puerto Ricans. Mohr began publishing in the 1970s and continues to write today. She was born and raised New York City and began her career as a graphic artist having studied at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School. Mohr has contributed many novels, children’s books, essays, and short story collections to the Latino literary canon. Mohr has received many honors including the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature, the American Book Award (1981), the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award, and *The New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year, and she was a
National Book Award finalist (1976). Despite her prolificacy, a search on *ABELL* only produces about thirty entries; few of these entries are studies specifically of Mohr’s work. This disparity is very interesting, considering that many critics, including Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia, consider Mohr to be the “precursor” to other “[Latina] writers” (83). Dominican American author Julia Alvarez herself admits that when she began her career as a teacher she did “not find many Latina writers except for Nicholasa Mohr” (Kevane and Heredia 24). The criticism that is available tends to focus on Mohr’s young adult literature, and is more often developed from a sociological standpoint than a literary one. An exception to this trend is Barbara Roche Rico’s “‘Rituals of Survival’: A Critical Reassessment of the Fiction of Nicholasa Mohr,” in which Rico hopes to “prompt a serious reconsideration of [Mohr’s] work […] and to show how her writing has a distinctive role within the canons of Latina/o literature, the literature of feminism, and the expanding canon of American culture” (161). In this essay, she provides a “big picture” inventory of a few of the most pervasive critical issues present in Mohr’s oeuvre. Mohr’s texts deserve even more literary critical attention, however, because with their simple, realistic prose, they delicately provide insight into patriarchy and constructions of gender and sexuality, especially of urban, working class Latinas.

Although Mohr and Díaz have different backgrounds and critical receptions, their texts resonate with one another because of their comparable treatment of similar issues such as class, race, and gender, and also because of the similar relationships that the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico share with the United States. Puerto Rico, as a commonwealth of the United States, has a history and status unique from other Latin American countries; Puerto Rico has been colonized in some way or another for at least
the past five hundred years. Previously under Spanish rule, Puerto Rico was annexed by
the U.S. in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American War. This transfer occurred, as most
colonial transactions, without the acknowledgement of the people of Puerto Rico. Since
Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, when they migrate to the mainland, they are not
immigrants in the same way that migrants from other Latin American countries are. The
Dominican Republic, by contrast, is an independent country, so has a different history
and relationship to the United States, but one equally informed by (neo)colonial and
imperialist pursuits. As is so often the case in U.S. policy regarding Latin America, the
United States actively supported the brutal authoritarian Trujillo dictatorship of the
Dominican Republic because of the economic and political advantages that his continued
power ensured the U.S. Trujillo’s regime lasted for a little over thirty years, until he was
assassinated by dissidents. As Greg Grandin asserts in the book *The Empire’s Workshop:
Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, in the 1940s,
although the U.S. supported the ever-spreading Latin American democratization, because
of the Cold War, the U.S. government soon revealed that “its preference for democrats
over autocrats was…contingent on political stability” (41). Because of the shakiness that
a “democratic openness” would present to a reforming country, the U.S. feared that this
openness would “allow the Soviets to gain a foothold on the [South American] continent”
(41). To prevent this, the U.S. instead opted to maintain standing governments, even if
they were dictatorships like the one in the Dominican Republic.

The idea of American colonial and neocolonial pursuits in the Caribbean is central
to Mohr and Díaz’s works. One of Mohr’s short stories, “The English Lesson,” for
instance, speaks of this relationship directly. In the story, one adult English learner in a
community class vocally opposes becoming a U.S. citizen, and explains U.S.-Dominican relations as he has observed them:

“I come here, pero I cannot help. I got no work at home. There, is political. The United States control most of the industry which is sugar and tourismo. Y—you have to know somebody. I tell you, is political to get a job, man! You don’t know nobody and you no work, eh? So I come here from necessity, pero this no my country […] Someday we gonna run our own country and be jobs for everybody.” (56-57)

Diego Torres, the speaker in this passage, is an undocumented Dominican worker living in the United States. He adamantly opposes becoming an American citizen because he feels it is not his home. In fact, he asserts that the United States helped to create and sustain the undesirable economic and living conditions on his beloved island. Not only does Diego have strong feelings about the U.S. imperialism wracking his country, but he also has a strong opinion about U.S. intervention in Puerto Rico. When a fellow English student, a Sicilian named Aldo Fabrizi, says that Puerto Rican William has “got it made” since he is a U.S. citizen by birth, Diego counters Aldo’s optimism: “Why he got it made, man? He force to leave his country” (69). Diego recognizes that while Puerto Ricans may be privileged with American citizenship, their island suffers economically and politically from this convenient colonial arrangement.

Besides their similar colonial/neocolonial histories, people from both Caribbean islands also share similar experiences once they migrate to the mainland United States. Early migrants from both islands tended to settle in the north, most often New York, and thus found themselves thrust into harsh environments and horrid working conditions.
Though not all migrants from even the same island have identical backgrounds, there are unifying experiences that many share. An overwhelming majority of the migrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic experienced racism, particularly those of darker skin. Latin American immigrants, despite their historical and cultural differences, are also racialized in the United States under the umbrella categories of “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Migrants from these two islands also tend to be from the poor, or working class.

However, some immigrants from the Dominican Republic flee as wealthy political refugees, escaping the brutal dictatorship. Among these immigrants was the renowned Julia Alvarez, Dominican American author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and *In the Time of Butterflies*. Alvarez’s main characters, much like herself, often come from affluent backgrounds, while Díaz and Mohr’s works tend to focus on poor immigrants.

This thesis consists of three chapters, each of which examines the texts primarily through the lens of gender and sexuality. Chapter one focuses on collective and individual constructions of masculinity, particularly a masculinity informed by machismo, and the relationship between these constructions and homosexuality. Latino homosexuality is much understudied in the academy, and because of the cultural stigma often attached to it, explicit homosexual themes are rare in Latino fiction. This scarcity is due in part to the superficial incompatibility between homosexuality and machismo. Machismo in itself is fraught with contradictions and challenges—most definitions fall short of capturing the complex, varied ways in which machismo is and can be expressed. Machismo has been traditionally articulated as an impulse to reject all things perceived as “feminine” so as to cultivate an extreme masculinity valuing virility, aggression, bravado,
and control. The traditional notions of machismo tend to limit this apparent hypermasculine gender expression in terms of a heterosexual feminine/masculine binary thus oversimplifying gender performance and marginalizing other sexual preferences. Díaz’s *Drown* provides the perfect forum for this discussion because of the explicit masculine performances and sexual tension that its protagonist, Yunior, struggles with. Very few essays examine gender and sexual identities in Díaz’s works; far fewer examine the texts using a queer theoretical framework, which is puzzling, given the importance of this theme in *Drown*. The short stories “Drown” and “Aurora” reveal the particularly fascinating relationships between gender performance and sexuality, and class struggles. They also, in their representations of very different types of relationships—homosexual/homosocial in “Drown” and violently heterosexual in “Aurora”—reveal how shaky these distinctions really are and demonstrate that there is no singular machismo.

Chapter two focuses on how the women of the stories in Mohr’s *Rituals of Survival* construct their subjectivities in relation to notions of motherhood. They both obey and subvert institutional definitions of motherhood; they also construct alternative and/or provisional notions of maternity. For instance, the bisexual Virginia, in Mohr’s “Brief Miracle (Virginia),” is troubled by the conflict between prescribed gender roles and her own sexuality. Virginia has to choose between embracing her sexuality and being a mother—there is no median available to her. This predicament is indicative of the roles that mothers are expected to play—often not thought of as sexed beings, mothers are required often to disregard their multifaceted identities in order to better serve their husbands and children. The ideal mothers are all-nurturing, self-sacrificing, and dutiful. Mothers who neglect to do this are considered deficient and selfish. In “Aunt Rosana’s
Rocker (Zoraida),” Zoraida’s autoerotism threatens her husband’s machista identity, so he, coupled with both sets of parents, infantilizes Zoraida in order to reassert power over her. In “A Time with a Future (Carmela),” the protagonist, Carmela, experiences and overcomes the similar infantilizing impulses of her children after her husband dies. Each woman copes with her oppression in very different ways, illustrating the restrictive nature of rigid gender roles and also illuminating the benefits and detriments of quiet subversion. Mohr’s characters are never solely victims or villains, but rather reveal the complexity of these processes and their consequences.

In the final chapter I will examine how adultery and other definitions and breaches of relational boundaries function in both Díaz’s *Drown* and Mohr’s *In Nueva York* and how these breaches are linked to social and national boundaries. Drawing on the work of Natalie J. Friedman, which examines the link between transnationality and adultery, I argue that Díaz and Mohr’s stories illuminate the ways in which the transgression of marital boundaries both coincides and conflicts with the crossing of national and cultural borders. Adultery, the cultivation of a physical or emotional relationship with a person other than one’s monogamous partner, can be both a gateway to and the result of a transnational project because of the permeability of boundaries required for both. While there are certain stories in these collections, such as “Fiesta, 1980” in *Drown*, and “Lali” in *In Nueva York*, that speak to these issues directly, I am more concerned in this chapter with the character development that can be discerned by looking at several of the short stories together. Both *Drown* and *In Nueva York*, as collections of discrete but interlinked short stories, lend themselves to this type of reading since the same characters appear in many of the stories. By reading the stories
holistically, one can make more accurate claims about these characters. The two characters I am most concerned with are Ramón from *Drown* and Lali from *In Nueva York*, since they both reveal interesting features about the nuanced ways that nation, gender, and class relate to marriage, especially since both characters engage in multiple adulterous affairs. I am interested in how Ramón’s experiences both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States, and how Lali’s migration to the mainland and subsequent acquisition of the English language, affect their development as transnational beings.

With this project I intend to bring queer theory/gender studies into greater conversation with Latino literary criticism in order to see what each reveals about the other through their intersections and interventions. I hope to see the complicated ways in which the specific social constructions of masculinity (machismo), femininity through the lens of motherhood and maternity, and matrimony (and its inverse, adultery), interact with ideologies of nationality, ethnicity, race, and class. These issues are particularly important now given the current political climate of the U.S., which is predicated on arbitrary boundaries of “us” and “them”—“outsiders” are suspected of being terrorists, Spanish-speaking immigrants are shunned and vilified, and homophobia is widespread. Mohr and Díaz’s stories demonstrate the complexities of these ideological conversations, and reveal the absurdity and the dangers of the impulse to create and sustain these artificial compartments. Unfortunately, limitations of time and space lead me to focus on only a select few of Díaz and Mohr’s works. Other works, such as Díaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Mohr’s *A Matter of Pride and Other Stories*, also speak to these issues, and thus are fertile ground for potential future investigation.
CHAPTER 1
QUEERING MASCULINITY AND HETERONORMATIVITY IN JUNOT DÍAZ’S
DROWN

Junot Díaz’s *Drown* is a collection of linked, semi-autobiographical short stories that mostly follow the protagonist, Yunior, as he grows up in New Jersey as a Dominican American. The stories chronicle his family’s immigration from the island to the states, allowing glimpses of their economic and family struggles as well as their social angst. The collection begins with a young Yunior living with his brother, Rafa, and his hardworking mother in the Dominican Republic. He and Rafa are troubled first by an absent and then later an abusive father, who is very “imaginative” with his punishments (Díaz 30). Appearing in the middle of the collection is the story “Drown,” which finds Yunior in his early adulthood living with only his quiet, “shadow warrior” mother (94). By this time Rafa is gone (presumably dead, if one takes into account some of Díaz’s other short stories that did not make this collection) and Yunior’s father, who has been reduced to “a sad guy” who asks Yunior’s mom for money, is in Florida with another woman. Theirs is most certainly not the picture of the “American Dream” fulfilled. The story reads like a series of recollections, mini-vignettes moving from various moments of the past to the present with little regard, it seems, for chronology. The main thread of the narrative is clearly the story of Yunior’s relationship with his best friend Beto, but the story also implicitly compares Yunior’s adulthood to his late youth.
The collection has received numerous glowing reviews, some of which are printed in the first few pages of the Riverhead edition. The *Austin American-Statesman* praises *Drown* as a book that observes “that old and much misunderstood Latino demon, machismo, which [is] something not innate to Latino males, but rather [is] the result of their often futile attempts to reconcile their dual role as men (in the eyes of their families) and as mere boys (in the eyes of the outside world).” Díaz’s collection is most certainly about machismo, but it is also about the nuances of sex, race, and class, and how they intersect and affect one another. The stories also demonstrate that the gulf between heterosexual and homosexual desire is not as clear or as broad as heteronormativity tries to make it seem. Similarly, the collection shows that the elusive “demon” that is machismo is more complicated than one might think. Machismo is not limited to heterosexuality or restricted from homosexuality, and the story “Drown” most vividly exposes this reality.

In this chapter, I examine Diaz’s short story collection *Drown* in order to understand how desire, sexuality, and gendering all work together with the concepts of nation, race, class, and immigrant status as a framework. Although I will focus extensively on Yunior and Beto’s individual sexuality and gender constructions and their resulting relationship as seen in the story “Drown,” I will also delve into other stories in the collection to emphasize Yunior’s development as a sexed and gendered being. I will likewise examine the story “Aurora,” which tells the story of a turbulent relationship between two young people, fraught with drug abuse, domestic violence, and dangerous sexual behaviors. While this is one of very few stories in the collection of which Yunior is not the protagonist, it develops many of the same issues as
“Drown,” thus furthering understanding of the text’s reckoning with the instability of masculinity and heterosexuality and the interrelatedness of gender and sexuality with class, ethnicity, and culture. My aim is to show how the characters in *Drown* operate within these rigid categorical confines while also subverting them and redefining what it means to be a man, a sexual being, a Dominican American, and a macho.

Latin American male sexuality, particularly the relationship between homosexuality and machismo, is grossly understudied. Two of the most insightful and poignant contributors to the study of Latino and Latin American homosexuality are Chris Girman and Reinaldo Arenas. Though they approach the subject from different lenses (Girman from an anthropological perspective and Arenas from that of memoir and fiction), they each address it in a way that is both comprehensive and discerning. Neither speaks directly about Junot Díaz's *Drown*, but both help to illuminate the topic of Latin American/Latino sexuality.

Girman’s work focuses on Latin American men and Latinos in the United States in an attempt to “refute the dominant Western paradigm of a distinct ‘gay identity’ or ‘gay liberation’” (11). Girman’s study emphasizes the difference between gender construction and sexual preference, and he distinguishes sexuality as a pleasure preference from an identity construction. He is particularly interested in the “macho” performance, and how macho men can impose order on their same-sex activities without compromising a macho masculine image. In his work, Girman pulls from the work of Reinaldo Arenas, which explores the porousness of sexuality.

In his memoir, *Before Night Falls*, Reinaldo Arenas claims that “In the country […] it is a rare man who has not had sexual relations with another man. Physical
desire overpowers whatever feelings of machismo our fathers take upon themselves to
instill in us” (19). Arenas is writing as a Cuban exile who spent his last years near
Miami. He was jailed because of his homosexuality, and later intentionally self-exiled
because of his identification as a “passive” homosexual (281). Arenas’s work is full
of eroticism and desire, as well as violence and danger, often all operating at once.
The young Arenas has a “huge sexual appetite” and experiments with “mares, sows,
hens […] turkeys” as well as “dogs,” and even “trees” (18, 19). As they grow older,
he and his cousins also have their way with fruits, prostitutes, and one another. The
memoir follows Arenas into an adulthood fraught with political danger and numerous
love exploits; at the midpoint of the text Arenas mentions that he has “had sex with
about five thousand men” (93). These same-sexed exploits are punishable by law, but
that does not prevent Arenas from seeking pleasure wherever he can find it. “Sexual
energy,” he contends, “generally overcomes all prejudice, repression, and
punishment,” and nature always wins the fight (19). In his book *Mucho Macho*, Chris
Girman says that Arenas’s work, “particularly those writings depicting the majority of
macho Cuban males as both bisexual and sex obsessed,” has been criticized for such a
depiction, and that many critics insist that the memoir should be read as “pure
fiction” (22).

Arenas’s work, whether anthropologically accurate or not, is still quite helpful
in understanding masculinity as a construction and the nuances of historical power
relations and sexuality. His memoir reveals what Foucault defines, in *The History of
Sexuality*, as the “regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on
human sexuality” in the Western world (11). Foucault declares that it was not until
the nineteenth century that “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality” (43). Prior to the development of the terminology and Westphal’s description of the “sexual sensibility” of the homosexual, the characterization of sodomy was as “a type of sexual relations,” more than as a category of people (43). The medicalization and compartmentalization of sexuality served as a method of asserting power and control over pleasure and people, at least in the West.

Arenas’s memoir emphasizes this relationship between sexuality and power, localizing this struggle to the Cuban dictatorship of Fidel Castro. Interestingly, Arenas asserts that in repressive communist-controlled Cuba, one “did not have to be a homosexual to have a relationship with a man; a man could have intercourse with another man as an ordinary act […] the gay who liked real macho men could also find one who wanted to live or be friends with him, without in any way interfering with the heterosexual life of that man” (108). In some ways, the tyrannically state-endorsed and enforced sexuality and gender performance in Cuba seems to have sparked “the sexual revolution” that Arenas describes. Arenas claims that the “existing sexual repression” ironically allowed “homosexuality to flourish” since anything the regime “proscribed was seen in a positive light by the nonconformists” (107). According to Arenas, the “concentration camps for homosexuals, and the police officers disguised as willing young men to entrap and arrest homosexuals,” essentially gave rise to “the promotion of homosexual activities” (107). The prohibition of behaviors deemed “unmanly” or “sexually immoral” is founded under the assumption that homosexuality and masculinity, or machismo, do not and cannot coexist. This dichotomy is false, and therefore produced the very result it attempted to prevent.
While Arenas’s Caribbean snapshot of aberrant sexuality may not be universal, it does serve to complicate the idea of the gender binary, as well as binaries of sexual orientation within the subscribed gender roles, particularly in a Latin American and Latino context. In other words, masculinity and machismo are more complicated than their usual definitions imply.

Although they have very different histories and circumstances, Arenas’s work can be used to better understand Yunior in Junot Díaz’s *Drown*. In many ways, Yunior is the quintessential stereotypical machista. He swears, resists authority, has sex with many women, or at least talks about having sex with many women, and deals drugs. But despite his many conventional attributes, Yunior, his best friend Beto, and their relationship complicate the machista archetype, exposing its limitations and complicating the homosexual/heterosexual binary. Beto’s character upsets the rigid sexual and gender mores treated in many of the stories in *Drown*. His sexuality is not one-dimensional or easily circumscribed, and he is very much a product of the machista ideology that Yunior is internalizing. Beto watches porn with his father while his mother cooks, pretending she does not know. Beto has learned that not only is watching porn an acceptable pastime, but that it is normal for men to engage in this erotic activity together. His and Yunior’s relationship is very strong, and their boundaries are quite fluid. Beto walks “into [Yunior’s] apartment without knocking” and also has a relationship with Yunior’s mother, who takes a break from her telenovelas to spend time with him (91). Without spending too much time tirelessly milking this metaphor, Beto is the impetus through which Yunior “comes out,” pulling him out of his sexual repression, “drawing [him] up from the basement,” so to
speak (91). Beto’s voice, which “crackled and made you think of uncles or grandfathers,” is comforting to Yunior because its strong, raspy hoarseness is indicative of the nurturing paternal figure Yunior never really has. Beto teaches Yunior how to play the masculine role, and he is “the best” at their various masculine performances. He is fearless, daring even to “talk to mall security” while shoplifting and “slamming the heavy bag” of stolen merchandise in the face of a white-haired sales associate while Yunior stands aside, “shitting [his] pants,” fearing jail and his pops, who “hits like a motherfucker” (Díaz 97, 98). Beto is also physically stronger than Yunior, and often uses his strength against him. In all of these ways, Beto simultaneously embodies and challenges Yunior’s perception of a masculine ideal.

The complications of machismo and heterosexuality are revealed through a few key episodes between Yunior and Beto. These passages are significant for a number of reasons. First, the incidents are only mentioned fleetingly and never directly spoken of again in the collection. Although many other issues in this story recur throughout the collection, such as Yunior’s father and their relationship, the political climate of the Dominican Republic, drug use, etc., the contents that relate to Beto are not explicitly mentioned outside of that story. This omission is puzzling, since the story takes place in the middle of the collection, and since the English publication takes its title from that of this story. The incongruity here suggests that while the chapter is crucial to the context of the collection, Yunior wishes to mute the effect that these experiences have on his life. This simultaneous muting and revelation implies that while Yunior, as a character, desires to repress his feelings and experiences, the text shows how these themes can be both central and repressed in the
lives of individuals, and in the larger Latino cultural context. Second, the incidents are couched right in the middle of the story, between elaborate descriptions of Yunior and Beto’s strong friendship and shared masculine performances—shop-lifting, swearing, and substance abuse—as well as Yunior’s individual performative acts: “We were raging then, crazy the way we stole, broke windows, the way we pissed on people’s steps and then challenged them to come out and stop us” (91). This deviant behavior allows both Yunior and Beto to assert their manhood in the way they have learned is appropriate in their community and class. The story thus comments on Yunior’s development as a sexed and gendered being.

Yunior and Beto are initially best friends, spending almost every day together. Their first homoerotic episode occurs one summer evening after a day at the pool, when the two end up at Beto’s apartment, where they watch an adult film together. They have watched about an hour of the film when Beto reaches into Yunior’s shorts:

What the fuck are you doing? I asked, but he didn’t stop. His hand was dry. I kept my eyes on the television, too scared to watch. I came right away, smearing the plastic sofa covers. My legs started shaking and suddenly I wanted out. He didn’t say anything to me as I left, just sat there watching the screen. (104)

Yunior uses language in order to express his surprise, but also to distinguish himself as a completely heterosexual, macho male. Yelling, “What the fuck are you doing,” is his way of proving to his audience, as well as himself, that he does not find Beto’s behavior acceptable. However, Yunior’s action, or inaction, proves otherwise. Beto “didn’t stop,” but then again, Yunior does not ask him to, but instead remains
submissive, allowing Beto to bring him to climax. While Beto pleases Yunior manually, Yunior keeps his eyes on the sexual performance on the screen as he subconsciously evaluates his own sexual performance and the possible transgression therein. Immediately afterwards, Yunior instinctively wants “out”—of the room, presumably, but the diction suggests that subconsciously Yunior also wants “out” in a more figurative way. Since “wanted out” is a phrasal verb and is not actually followed by any object (such as my conjecture “of the room”), the sentence lends for an abstract reading. Perhaps what Yunior really craves is a way “out” of the restrictions that seem to render a sexual relationship with Beto as forbidden.

Quite some time later, the two lose touch and are no longer friends. Yunior shrugs off his estranged relationship with his friend by explaining that Beto is “pato” (“gay,” derogatory depending on context) now, but his relationship with Beto does not end after their moment(s) of intimacy (91). In fact, after their first sexual experience together, while Yunior worries that he might end up “abnormal, a fucking pato,” that fear is diffused by the fact that Beto is his “best friend,” a fact that matters to him “more than anything” (104). His fear does not prevent him from seeking Beto out again the next night at the pool, nor does it later prevent him from rejoining Beto at his empty house. That the vignette describing their sexual relationship begins “Twice. That’s it,” is very telling. If the phrase is indeed to work as the disclaimer it seems to be, it should not indicate multiple encounters, but would have been more convincing if it instead read “once.” As it is, it works less like a disclaimer of Yunior’s sexual preference, and more like an indication of the complicated relationship he and Beto share.
Yunior’s erotic relationship with Beto not only exposes the multiplicity of sexuality, but also demonstrates what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in the book *Between Men*, describes as “a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” male relationships (Sedgwick 1684). Although Yunior self-identifies as heterosexual, and defines sexuality as homosexuality versus heterosexuality, he yearns for his friendship with Beto, and he is deeply ambivalent about the fact that they have traveled down the continuum toward a sexual relationship. While he strongly rejects identifying as “pato,” at the same time he mourns the loss of their homosocial closeness.

Chris Girman, too, describes how homosocial relationships operate within the context of the sexual continuum. Many of Girman’s nonsexual relationships with other men are presented through the perspective of a homoerotic relationship that never happened. Girman and other queer theorists claim that sometimes heterosexual men feel a loss for their potentially intimate relationships with other men and grapple with this loss in many different ways. Girman describes one of his own experiences with a man on the beach:

I leaned back […] and rested my body against his, placing my head in his lap and closing my eyes once again. In a few minutes, I raised my head again, touched the inside of his arm and asked “¿Está bien?,” like, you know, if it was okay if I laid here like this, and I remember that he sort of turned away, rubbed my hair for an instant and said nothing, but let me remain there in his lap. (97)
Juan Carlos, the man in this passage, is not being actively intimate with Girman, but allows him, a complete stranger, to lay his head innocently in his lap while Juan remains passive. Girman describes this reaction, the silent compliance of Juan Carlos as an example of “what [Judith] Butler might call the ‘incorporation’ of heterosexual melancholy, or how melancholic identification is preserved on the surface of the body” (Girman 97). Butler is adopting Freud’s terminology here. But whereas Freud defined psychic miming as “a response to, and refusal of loss,” Butler asserts that psychic mimesis is “not motivated by drama of loss and wishful recovery, but appears to precede and constitute desire (and motivation) itself” (Butler 1717). For Butler, mimetism occurs before “the possibility of loss and the disappointments of love” (1717). Accordingly, the psychic mimesis, or incorporation, will happen as a sort of defense mechanism against a possible hurt or disappointment—before the relationship, or anything attached to it has a chance to fail. Put simply, for Butler and Girman, “heterosexual melancholia” involves the mourning that occurs before a loss when the “lost object” can never actually be possessed.

Butler’s notion of “heterosexual melancholia” resonates with Díaz’s Yunior. Compare Yunior’s narration of his second sexual encounter with Beto:

We sat in front of his television, in our towels, his hands bracing against my abdomen and thighs. I’ll stop if you want, he said and I didn’t respond. After I was done, he laid his head in my lap. I wasn’t asleep or awake, but caught somewhere in between, rocked slowly back and forth the way surf holds junk against the shore, rolling it over and
over. In three weeks he was leaving. Nobody can touch me, he kept saying. (*Drown* 105)

Beto asks Yunior if he wants him to stop, but Yunior does not respond at all and instead seems to be swimming in a sea of acquiescence. He does not reject Beto’s advances, allowing him to lay his head in his lap, but does not verbally invite them, either. This suggests that Yunior, like Juan Carlos, has “incorporated” Butler’s heterosexual melancholia. As in their first erotic liaison, this time again Yunior is passively unresponsive, and silently allows Beto to perform his will. Yunior’s passivity is important to note here; Yunior does not feel like an active agent in this exchange, but feels like he is being rocked by the waves of the ocean, a force much stronger than he is. It is almost as if Yunior has been seduced. His seeming seduction by Beto complicates Yunior’s masculine formation because traditional concepts of machismo usually reject passivity as an effeminate construct. Even so, the desire within their friendship is shaped and motivated by machismo.

Yunior’s melancholia allows him to deal with his sexual confusion as well as with the pain he experiences because Beto is leaving in only three weeks. Yunior dwells on this fact throughout the story, and his often ambivalent feelings towards Beto can be attributed to this unfortunate circumstance: “Beto was leaving for college at the end of the summer and was delirious from the thought of it—he hated everything about the neighborhood, the break-apart buildings, the little strips of grass, the piles of garbage around the cans, and the dump, especially the dump” (91). Beto hates and ardently desires to escape from the place where he and Yunior grew up and made so many memories together. He feels limited and confined in his dilapidated
community that for him only symbolizes lifeless, unwanted excess and refuse. Other stories in *Drown* reveal that Yunior actually has fond memories of the dump Beto so avidly opposes. Yunior is not particularly in love with his neighborhood, but he does not view it as negatively as Beto does.

Because Beto leaves to go to college, and thus leaves Yunior behind, Yunior does not see that they could ever have a future friendship, let alone an intimate relationship. Yunior has to effectively separate himself from Beto to form his own identity. Butler claims that “the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation […] a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some ‘Other’” (1717). For Yunior, the “Otherness” he incorporates is Beto’s queerness and, as Butler would contend, “That ‘Other’ installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of that ‘self’ to achieve self-identity; it is as if it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self’s possibility” (1717). Since Beto’s queerness represents the “Other” in terms of the gendered/sexual aspect of Yunior, Yunior thus “defines [his] own [gendered/sexual] identity in opposition to—and thus in terms of—that of the gay other” (Richter 1620).

Yunior incorporates Beto’s queer otherness in order to separate himself, and this otherness is only an accentuation of their other, more obvious otherness in terms of class and acculturation:

We’d visited the school and I’d seen how beautiful the campus was, with all the students drifting from dorm to class. I thought of how in high school our teachers loved to crowd us into their lounge every time
a space shuttle took off from Florida. Our teacher, whose family had
two grammar schools named after it, compared us to the shuttles. A few
of you are going to make it. Those are the orbiters. But the majority of
you are just going to burn out. Going nowhere. He dropped his hand
onto his desk. I could already see myself losing altitude, fading, the
earth spread out beneath me, hard and bright. (105-106)

Despite their similar backgrounds and shared experiences, the friends do not seem to
share a similar future, and Yunior is embittered when he realizes that his and Beto’s
life-trajectories are worlds apart. Although Beto is most certainly a “shuttle” who has
made it to college, Yunior sees himself as wedded with and inevitably linked to the
realm that Beto is desperately trying to escape. As a high school student, Yunior has
already released any ideas he has of “orbiting” the Earth, and has instead resigned
himself to a fate of crashing into the hard ground. Beto’s rejection of his community
and upbringing is, for Yunior, a rejection and betrayal of himself, especially because
he does not see himself going anywhere, but is destined to always stay on the ground.
The phallic imagery here is overwhelming and quite indicative of Yunior and Beto’s
joint gendering and sexing. Beto, who is symbolized by the virile, phallic shuttle, has
taken off, released from his social inhibitions, while Yunior, who falls, limply and
lifelessly to the ground, remains unproductive.

The rift in Yunior’s relationship with Beto thus reveals some important
nuances of power. Yunior is not pushed away from Beto only because of their sexual
encounters, but also by the fact that Beto has left their old stomping ground and
shared social class. Beto’s sexual “otherness” enhances and is enhanced by his class
otherness in relation to Yunior, and thus is not the singular impetus for their estrangement. Yunior often feels like he has to prove himself to Beto, and relishes the moments when he knows something that Beto does not know, since Beto thought Yunior “didn’t read, not even dictionaries” (94). He remembers that even earlier in their friendship Beto expands his own horizons, encouraging Yunior to “learn how to walk the world,” to experience all that is “out there” (102). Yunior instead skips school to watch TV, sometimes later finding Beto in the familiar spots—“home or down by the swings”—but often Beto disappears to create and sustain other relationships in other towns (102). Since Beto is going to college, and as such is becoming more powerful in terms of capital and status, he is, especially in Yunior’s perspective, leaving him behind, with much less power and resources.

This is especially hurtful to Yunior because of the respect he has for Beto. Beto is Yunior’s best friend and probably his most influential role model, so he struggles to negotiate both his opposition and his attraction to Beto. Although Yunior tells his mother that he “didn’t look” for Beto, he actually has a really hard time staying away from him, passing Beto’s dark apartment, even going so close as “the busted-up door,” to which he places an eavesdropping ear. He does all of this almost automatically, before he has even “decided […] if [he will] talk to him” (92). Yunior’s impulsive need to see Beto implies that he is almost uncontrollably attracted to him, despite what he says or does in an attempt to prove otherwise. He is not even sure if he wants to see Beto or not, but is reflexively drawn to him anyway. Even though a relationship with Beto compromises Yunior’s masculine self-perception, he still yearns for that relationship nevertheless. Yunior lies to his mother, because
owning up to his desire for Beto would mean owning up to all of the feelings he has worked tirelessly to repress.

Before Yunior meets Beto, his strongest male models are his brother, Rafa, and their father. Yunior’s relationships with Rafa, his father, and Beto have nurtured his subscription to a limited violent, self-destructive masculinity that is revealed when he describes his present-day masculine exploits. He and his friends often “drink too much, [and] roar at each other” as they party each night (Díaz 99). They also yell absurd pejoratives at innocent passersby, carry dangerous weapons, and spend most of their days loitering and fighting. Yunior’s performance echoes what John Riofrio, in his essay “Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy, and Emasculation,” has said about Yunior’s brother, Rafa. Riofrio asserts that Rafa constructs an extreme version of masculinity because there are no male models to show him any other possibilities. Riofrio frames the trope of the absent fathers (and the adolescent masculinity that follows) within the larger context of the early 20th century Dominican economic and political climate, claiming that “the poverty which plagues the island has created a situation in which survival depends on fathers leaving the island to try and carve out a better life for themselves and their families […] resulting in] an entire generation of Dominican boys forced to grow up without fathers” (26). This historical context is central to Díaz’s work. Riofrio’s essay deals extensively with the story “Ysrael,” which Riofrio believes “sets the stage for the picture of masculinity which […] reveals] itself throughout all of the ten stories” (26). Although Rafa does not show up in the story “Drown,” understanding his influence on
Yunior is essential to understanding Yunior’s relationship with Beto and with his own masculinity and macho sexuality.

Without older male role models to demonstrate a working masculinity with which the young men can contend or agree, the young men are left without viable examples of gender expression. They therefore have to imagine their own models by assembling pieces in whichever order they fit. One of their only external models of masculinity comes in the form of the posters of wrestlers dropped out of planes, which endorse violent masculine performances and float ironically “down as slow as butterfly blossoms” (Díaz 7). They use these images, coupled with the “hollow remains of what the fathers have left behind” to fashion their working masculinity (Riofrio 26). Often the result is an adolescent machismo, which Riofrio describes as “an excess of masculinity” (24). Riofrio contends that since Rafa and his peers “create, out of the romanticized vestiges of their imaginations, their own vision of masculinity,” it is unavoidable that their masculinity turns out to be impractical and immature (27). Rafa’s masculinity specifically is very “sexualized and egocentric” and reveals many notions of traditional patriarchal power (27). Rafa ensures his virile image by claiming that he will “chinga all [his] girls and then chinga everyone else’s” (Díaz 4).

Although Rafa is quite marginal in the most of the stories, and will be so in this exposition, his purpose in the collection is crucial. As Riofrio claims, for the young Dominican men both historically and in Díaz’s stories, it was “their peers and not their fathers who [were] responsible for teaching them how to be men” (27). Yunior’s older brother, Rafa, is not only feared and idolized by Yunior, but is also
emulated and provides what their father does not in those crucial developmental years. Riofrio’s analysis of a collectively created masculinity also helps to explain why Beto is such an influential role model for Yunior even though they are peers.

The shakiness of Yunior’s masculine persona causes him to fear having to confront Beto ever again. That is why when Yunior returns home from a run and hears his mother talking, he is momentarily “terrified that Beto’s inside with her” (Díaz 101). When he realizes that she is only on the phone, he relaxes, and reasserts his masculinity by performing his patriarchal role as head of the household, forcing her to hang up the phone when he decides “That’s enough” (Díaz 101). Since Beto threatens Yunior’s status as a macho, he has to maintain control over his image by rejecting Beto and by using his own patriarchal power over those who are not as strong as him.

Another story in the collection that calls into question the construction of the “macho” through revealing shaky power dynamics and frustrated emasculation is the story “Aurora.” The story is narrated by Lucero, who spends most of the story either dealing drugs with his main man, Cut, or seeking out his tragically addicted lover, Aurora. His and Aurora’s relationship is categorized largely by violence and discontent, since both Lucero and Aurora seem unable to break away from one another, each addicted to the volatile energy of the other. Although so much can and should be said about Aurora herself—barely seventeen, fresh out of juvenile detention, a pickpocket, and already “lost” in a drug addiction—for the purposes of this paper I focus only on her relationship with Lucero and the parallels that exist between his and Yunior’s character.
While the stories of “Drown” and “Aurora” may not seem similar on the surface, when read together they allow for a more nuanced study of the development of masculinity in the collection as a whole. “Aurora” offers an alternate path shaped by similar social and cultural issues, and critiques these issues from a very different perspective. There is not much explicit narrative overlap between the two stories. In fact, there is only one mention of Lucero in “Drown”—significant mostly because he is mentioned directly in comparison with Yunior. Yunior casually and perhaps unwittingly asserts that they live parallel lives—Yunior providing the “shitty dope” to the community while “the crackheads have their own man, Lucero” (“Drown,” 93). This association is not merely incidental. Lucero and Yunior grew up and live in the same neighborhood, and Yunior’s brief comparison of himself to Lucero is an acknowledgment that both of them are operating within a similar, if not the same, contextual framework.

Lucero’s relationship with Aurora echoes that of Yunior and Beto in that they are both somewhat insecure. In many ways, these two relationships are the opposite faces of the same coin. Although Lucero and Aurora’s is a heterosexual relationship, their relationship is not necessarily privileged within the collection, but rather is presented as yet another inadequate, limited model. That Lucero and Aurora’s relationship is characterized by extreme violence indicates the collection’s overall mission to question compulsory heteronormativity and to expose masculinity as a fragile construction.

Though Lucero claims that he and Aurora are “in love,” their romance is overshadowed by, or perhaps the cause of, recurring bloody, vicious episodes
(“Aurora,” 64). The young lovers continually abuse one another and have countless scars to prove it. The story begins, for instance, with a description of the “long and swollen” scratches Aurora puts on Lucero’s arm with her “sharp-ass nails,” and ends with a trail of blood escaping Aurora’s ear, “like a worm” (48, 65). During one of their sweetest moments, when Aurora “kisses the parts of [Lucero’s] face that almost never get touched,” and admires his “long eyelashes,” she asks, “How could anyone hurt a man with eyelashes like this?” His reply is that he does not know, but he then reveals that Aurora has certainly tried to hurt him, though she was provoked: “She once tried to jam a pen in my thigh, but that was the night I punched her chest black-and-blue so I don’t think it counts” (53). It is hard to determine which is most disturbing—the abuse itself, or the nonchalant manner with which they both speak about it. Take, for instance, the ironic and casual way they describe a domestic argument they overhear:

Upstairs my neighbors have their own long night going and they’re laying out all their cards about one another. Big cruel loud cards.

Listen to that romance, she says.

It’s all sweet talk, I say. They’re yelling because they’re in love.

(52)

While this exchange is very tongue-in-cheek, it is also quite telling. Somehow for Aurora and Lucero, anger and violence have become typical components of everyday relationships, and when present, prove that the two parties involved are “in love”—or at least do not necessarily automatically prove otherwise.
Domestic violence is real. As I continue with this analysis, I want to stress that I am very aware that this issue is dangerous, and is never acceptable or justifiable. That said, I think that there are definitely some trends in the story “Aurora” that might help to identify where Lucero’s violent reactions are stemming from—not in order to excuse his behavior, but instead to see the various contributing issues that Díaz is attempting to illuminate through this story. While not always the case, Lucero often reacts most violently when Aurora expresses the desire to have a more stable relationship. After she returns from juvie, for instance, Aurora tells Lucero of her fantasy of conjugal bliss: “I made up this whole new life in there. You should have seen it. The two of us had kids, a big blue house, hobbies, the whole fucking thing” (65). Lucero is quiet and listens intently this time, but “A week from then” when she returns to the fantasy, “asking [him] again, begging actually, telling [him] all the good things [they]’d do” Lucero responds physically and hits her (65). Aurora wants Lucero to “promise her a love that’s never been seen anywhere,” but Lucero never makes that promise (52).

Lucero’s violence toward Aurora seems marked by his inability (either perceived or self-generated) to provide her with the happily-ever-after that she so craves. Aurora’s desires reveal the pervasiveness of the middle-class, suburban American cultural “dream,” and how this model endorses the heterosexual married, economically productive, and procreative couple as the norm. Lucero, in his current occupation as an illicit drug dealer, does not have access to this middle-upper-class ideal, and he resents Aurora for constantly reminding him of this, especially since in her current drug dependent state, she, too, is denied access to this model.
Ironically, although he is a dealer himself, it pains Lucero to see Aurora in the state she is in, and he is often repulsed by her. Ultimately, Lucero wishes Aurora would beat her addiction and just depend on him instead. In the section titled “I Could Save You,” he walks with her to the Hacienda, an infamous crack and prostitution house. He is uncomfortable about going with her, fearing a drug bust, and tells her to hurry. As he watches her walk away, he thinks about “how easy it would be for her to turn around and say, Hey, let’s go home. I’d put my arm around her and I wouldn’t let her go for like fifty years, maybe not ever. I know people who quit just like that, who wake up one day with bad breath and say, No more. I’ve had enough” (61). He does not really see a healthy future with Aurora because he does not see that she will ever be free of her addiction. Despite his feelings that he should “Dump her sorry ass” like Cut advises, Lucero is hopelessly addicted to Aurora (64). He hardly has the “iron will” he proclaims to have and this makes him feel weak and unclean (63).

Attached to these feelings are anxieties over Aurora’s apparent unrestrained sexuality. Although Aurora claims, “she ain’t with anybody else,” Lucero does not believe this is true, and after unprotected sex with her, he feels “nasty” and wants to “put [his] fist in her face” (55). He is disappointed in himself for the way he compulsively seeks Aurora while she seeks pleasure not from him, but from substances. Lucero’s anxiety over Aurora’s possible sexual transgressions manifests itself in strange ways, most often subconsciously. After a long night of drugs and drinking, the two fall asleep on the couch and Lucero’s fears are confirmed by a dream: “Later I open my eyes and catch her kissing Cut. She’s pumping her hips into him and he’s got his hairy-ass hands in her hair. Fuck, I say but then I wake up and she’s snoring on the
couch” (53). Lucero does not have much control over his own, let alone Aurora’s irrational habits. She is constantly disappearing, always just barely escaping his grasp. Even when she is lying peacefully beside him, he imagines that she is betraying him. Aurora is just too hard to lock down, and that is frustrating for Lucero. Lucero’s anxiety that he cannot control Aurora’s sexuality by violence or by any other means indicates that the text is actively critiquing a model of masculinity predicated on the conquest of women.

Interesting in this passage, too, is the fact that Aurora’s partner in Lucero’s imagined sexual transgression is not her friend Harry, with whom she constantly spends time, but is Cut, Lucero’s roommate and partner. Lucero’s strong homosocial relationship with Cut is strikingly reminiscent of that between Yunior and Beto. Like the pair of friends in “Drown,” Lucero and Cut mutually constitute one another as masculine entities. Lucero admires Cut’s business sense, his “minesweeper” eyes, and his cool self-assurance (57). Cut teaches Lucero to do his “dealing nice and tranquilo” and without “a lot of talking,” very much the model tiguere (56). The difference in the two relationships is that while Yunior and Beto have traversed to the sexual end of the continuum, Lucero and Cut’s friendship never reaches that point. However, that Lucero’s sexual anxiety is linked to both Aurora and Cut demonstrates that their homosocial relationship could just as easily tread on the erotic.

Because Lucero values Cut’s opinion greatly, many of his interactions with Aurora are informed by his relationship with Cut. Lucero is very aware, for instance, that Cut is “not a fan of Aurora,” and that is why Cut refuses to give Lucero the messages Aurora leaves with him (48). When Aurora comes for a midnight visit, Cut
advises Lucero to ignore her, to “Just leave it alone” (48). Although Lucero disregards Cut’s counsel, when he joins Aurora in the next room, he wonders if perhaps he should “dis [Aurora] for being away so long” because Cut is “probably listening” (49). He decides against this idea as well, but the reflection alone shows that Lucero’s platonic relationship with Cut is intimately tied to his sexual relationship with Aurora. That Lucero often impulsively seeks Aurora “especially when Cut’s fucking his girl in the next bed” only reinforces this observation (54). Cut’s sexual activity prompts Lucero to spend the night looking for Aurora in empty apartments and crack houses until he finds her.

The complex relationship between Lucero’s conscious and unconscious sexual impulses thus reveals that sexuality is more fluid than the rigid confines that traditional binaries, such the macho/feminine and homosexual/heterosexual, allow. Lucero’s unstable relationship with Aurora indicates, too, that class, just like other social processes, is inextricable from all other processes, and also that capitalist-sanctioned compulsory heterosexuality poses its own complications within these frameworks. As a whole, Drown implicitly queers all of these different manifestations of these performed processes, and consequently allows for a more nuanced portrayal of how these processes interact in a Latino body.
CHAPTER 2
MOTHERHOOD, MASCULINITY, AND MOHR

The summary provided on the back cover of Nicholasa Mohr’s *Rituals of Survival: A Woman’s Portfolio* describes the collection of short stories as a “testimonial to the indomitable women who face urban blight, poverty and, most of all, the limiting roles that men try to create for them” (*Rituals*). It goes on to state that the women characters of the stories “demand respect” for the “domestic and social revolutions they pursue” (*Rituals*). In this chapter, I will examine the effects of these domestic and social revolutions and how these acts of rebellion are informed by the very structures the women characters hope to subvert. Mainly, I will look at how the women in these stories struggle to simultaneously embrace and reject the concept of motherhood and how they negotiate the intricate power dynamics and confinement of patriarchal control. This will require an examination of the relationship between patriarchy, machismo, and masculine dominance, and feminine sexuality, subjugation, and motherhood. This chapter continues the discussion of masculinity from the previous chapter and observes how these ongoing conceptions are intimately connected to ongoing formations of femininity and female sexuality as presented in socially constructed maternity. These constructions are fraught with impossible contradictions—women are infantilized, but are also expected to be sexually responsive to their husbands and effectively regulate their domestic sphere, even though this charge is often usurped. Mohr uses her characters to illustrate how women
necessarily attempt to negotiate, subvert, and escape from these contradictions. Mohr’s stories also show that while maternity and wifehood are often conflated, each is a separate structure intricately comprised of prescriptive roles and practices. These complex systems are not intrinsically oppressive or subversive, but can be either depending on the situation.

A fundamental component of both of these structures, particularly in patriarchal capitalist systems, is the regulation of women’s sexuality. In order for the patriarchal constructions of masculinity and machismo to remain unchallenged, women’s sexuality must be contained within the rigid definitions and confines of the patriarchal system. These rigid limits on women’s sexuality are especially stringent in the machismo of the Latino patriarchal order, informed by a long history of colonialism and racism. The machista ideology sustains itself by strictly upholding explicit gender and sexual roles, as described by Elizabeth Garcia in her essay “‘Degrees of Puertoricanness’: A Gendered Look at Esmeralda Santiago’s When I was Puerto Rican”:

Latina womanhood and sexuality has consistently been defined within the parameters of the virgin/whore dichotomy. This dichotomy stipulates women's roles in relation to men's roles and desires as dictated by machista ideologies [...] In addition to being linked to concepts of respect, dignity, and honor, machismo also defines Latino manhood through his dominance over women, both physically and sexually. Men are believed to have a stronger sexual drive and are therefore allowed to express these desires [...] Marianas are to be submissive wives who take care of their home, children, and husband. (385)
The virgin/whore dichotomy Garcia mentions is not exclusive to machista ideologies, but has plagued women for centuries. Women have often been contradictorily expected to be pure, asexual, and untainted, but also to produce family heirs. The model for this type of chaste motherhood is the Virgin Mary—impossible to emulate for obvious reasons. In *Myths of Motherhood*, Shari L. Thurer asserts that this model was stringently adopted in the Victorian era, known for its representation of the “Angel of the House” cult of domesticity. In Anne Kingston’s *The Meaning of Wife*, she explains that the “containment and control of female sexuality was one of the foundations of Western marriage” and that this control sanctioned female desire only in certain contexts, “legisлатing sexual behavior” (110). Thus there were certain lawful obligations women were expected to adhere to as wives. “Providing sex, even when she didn’t feel like it,” Kingston continues, “was regarded as nonnegotiable well into the second half of the twentieth century” (110). Such contradictions continue to be placed on women in the late 20th century. In the Latino community, these expectations remain very strong, and women much more often have to sacrifice their own freedoms in order to uphold the machista social order. They are expected to perform their duties as housewives and child bearers. Religion also plays a strong role in the sustaining of these patriarchal confines, since a considerable percentage of Latinos are practicing Catholics, and thus have fewer acceptable resources for autonomous sexual control.

When the sexualities of Mohr’s characters defy these strict, patriarchal definitions, they threaten the patriarchal order. This threat is most explicitly illustrated in the first story in Mohr’s collection, titled “Aunt Rosana’s Rocker (Zoraida).” The story revolves around the sexual unease experienced by a married heterosexual couple, and of
all of the stories in *Rituals*, it provides the most comprehensive analysis of the contradictory constructions of wifehood and motherhood in an order informed by machista ideology. The story is a model of how women who attempt to struggle against these constructions are consequently subjected to paternalistic reprimands and control. “Aunt Rosana’s Rocker (Zoraida)” also shows that women who transgress the sanctioned sexuality are not only defined adversely in regards to the virgin/whore dichotomy, but also in the distinction between human and animal, or inhuman.

When the story begins, Zoraida, the wife, has an almost supernatural sexuality. She experiences vivid, erotic dreams during which she climaxes audibly and visually, but seemingly unconsciously, since she never remembers in the morning. Her husband, Casto, desperately sets up a meeting with their parents, and they decide collectively that Zoraida should be taken to see Doña Digna, the spiritualist. After Zoraida is “cured,” she begins to reject Casto’s sexual advances by retreating to her favorite rocking chair, yet another form of autoeroticism both because of the suggestive movement of the chair and because of the romantic fantasies she indulges in while rocking. When Casto reaches his wit’s end, he asks their parents again to intervene and together they decide on another solution.

Their sexual unease essentially encompasses two major conflicts. While Zoraida is invested in her status as “mother,” she appears to be ambivalent about her conjugal “duties” as wife—her sexuality refuses to stay confined, thus destabilizing her husband Casto and the patriarchal structure that rules their relationship. Casto’s masculinity is sustained so long as Zoraida’s femininity and sexuality remain within the confines of patriarchal power. When this power structure is compromised by Zoraida’s refusal to
submit to Casto sexually, Casto’s masculinity becomes vulnerable because Zoraida’s position as a wife and mother constitute conversely Casto’s position as a husband and father.

Zoraida’s autoerotic episodes terrify and threaten her husband Casto, whose stomach turns “ice cold” when he watches her as she lies stretched out on the bed pulling at the covers; turning, twisting her body and rocking her buttocks sensually. Her knees had been bent upward with her legs far apart and she had thrust her pelvis forward forcefully and rhythmically. Zoraida’s head was pushed back and her mouth open, as she licked her lips, moaning and gasping with excitement. (10)

Casto describes Zoraida as seemingly possessed, her forceful thrusts and frantic, erotic rocking is too much for him to bear. He reacts with barely restrained violence, making “two fists, squeezing tightly, and watch[ing] as his knuckles popped out tensely under his skin” (9). He is so frustrated, hurt, and angry, that he exclaims: “If only I could beat someone!” and bangs his fists against the table (9). Casto feels sexually inadequate, because “never, in all their years of marriage had [Zoraida] ever uttered such sounds […] or shown any passion or much interest in doing it” (13). In fact, she tells him often to just “hurry, be quiet, and get it over with” (13). Casto cannot fathom that Zoraida’s sexuality can be autonomous, or that she could have any control over her own sexual impulses. It is easier for Casto to believe that “something or someone had taken a hold of her” and that she certainly “was not alone in that room and in that bed!” (11). Because Zoraida is much more satisfied by her phantom lover, Casto feels as though his manhood is being rejected. This perceived emasculation is why Casto fears Zoraida’s solitary sexuality, “backing out
of the room” slightly when she moves her sleeping head (14). In order to reassert his manhood, Casto refuses to give up his bed, his throne, in order to get a more restful sleep on the couch because he is “still a man after all, a macho, master of his home” (12). He may be master of his domain, but Casto takes precautions just in case. Before crawling into bed with her, he makes sure to cross himself, even though he is not very religious. While Zoraida enjoys her late night rapture, Casto deploys derogatory terms silently in her direction, calling her “Puta! Whore!” and “bitch” (13).

In order to feel like a man, or to be considered a man by himself or anyone else, Casto has to be the dueño of Zoraida in all respects. Zoraida’s role is not satisfied simply because she continues to fulfill her duties as the classic mariana housekeeper and mother. She has to fulfill her duties as a wife and “as a woman,” or else Casto loses his self-worth and dignity (12). When Zoraida experiences pleasure not at the hands of her husband, she is performing an ultimate transgression of his sexual authority over her body. This transgression is felt so emphatically by Casto that he likens Zoraida to an animal: “Another lover, is that what you want, so you can become an animal? Because with me, let me tell you, you ain’t no animal. With me you’re nothing” (20). Because Zoraida’s uncontrolled, undefined sexuality causes her to have a sexual identity apart from a sanctioned, “natural” sexuality with Casto, she is considered to be savage and inhuman, an animal. According to Casto, this desire for a separate sexual identity is absurd because with him, her identity is only an extension of his own. She is “nothing” individually.

Worthy of note here, is why Casto, a handsome, “tall and robust […] picture of good health” would be attracted to Zoraida in the first place. It is Zoraida’s “frail and sickly appearance” that attracts Casto to her. She “looks ill […] like a little sick sparrow
flirting with death and having the upper hand” (17). When describing her to a friend later, Casto praises her for being shy and “a real lady” instead of openly flirtatious and “like a man” (17). He also, interestingly, admires her for being “Quietly stubborn” and “Not at all submissive.” He acknowledges that while “nobody’s gonna make the sparrow healthy […] it ain’t gonna die either” (17). Instinctively, Casto wants to take care of Zoraida, and though he somewhat admires her stubbornness with regard to her flirting with death, he also believes her frailty can be controlled—she will eventually depend on him to take care of her. By providing her own sexual satisfaction and by retreating to her rocking chair she uses her beloved stubbornness against Casto, which he resents.

Casto is the sole authority of the house, making almost all decisions, from the most significant to the most mundane. Take, for instance, his and Zoraida’s birth control plan:

After the last pregnancy, in an attempt to prevent children, Casto had decided on the rhythm system, where abstention is practiced during certain days of the month. It was, he reasoned, not only sanctioned by the Catholic Church, but there were no drugs or foreign objects to put into one’s body, and he did not have to be afraid of catching something nor getting sick. (18)

Although Zoraida’s body is the one affected most by any birth control decision, she does not seem to have had any part in making this crucial assessment. Instead, Casto has decided alone, and has done so in his best interest. He will not have to be “afraid of catching something” or “getting sick.” In this glimpse into Casto’s thought process, there is absolutely no evidence that he has even considered Zoraida’s needs and fears, but her
health and safety are neglected as secondary to his own. Her name is not even mentioned, though hers would obviously be the “body” that is threatened by the possibly harmful “drugs or foreign objects” that other birth control methods rely on.

Casto’s authoritarian control over Zoraida’s body and reproduction is reminiscent of Ann Ferguson’s theory of sex/affective production. In her essay, “On Conceiving Motherhood and Sexuality: A Feminist-Materialist Approach,” Ann Ferguson presents the concept of “sex/affective production,” which she describes as “a way of understanding the social organization of labor and the exchange of services that occurs between men and women in the production of children, affection, and sexuality” (69). She states that “[m]any different modes of sex/affective production are male dominant (or patriarchal). In general, they all have in common an unequal and exploitative production and exchange of sexuality, affection, and parenting between men and women; that is, women have less control over the process of production (e.g., control of human reproductive decisions) and the exchange of services” (70). So while the decision to refrain from having children may be beneficial to Zoraida, who has suffered many miscarriages, the decision ultimately rests with Casto and is indicative of their exploitative power dynamic. Ferguson stresses that the production of things and the production of people are not mutually exclusive realms, but are operating within the same capitalist framework, only separated in our collective imaginations because of the artificial differentiation between public and private spheres (68). Nancy Chodorow, in the book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, explains that the “activities of a wife/mother have a nonbounded quality,” meaning that they consist of “diffuse obligations” and that women who are wives/mothers have to
operate under a “continuous connection to and concern about children” while also maintaining an “attunement to adult masculine needs” (179). Despite this, as Adrienne Rich affirms in the book *Of Woman Born*, “the woman at home with children is not believed to be doing serious work; she is just supposed to be acting out of maternal instinct” and as such is not a valuable contributor to the capitalist system of production which rewards members of “the paid labor force” (38).

Zoraida’s role as wife and mother and Casto’s as patriarch are also interdependent in terms of even the most menial duties of housekeeping and hosting. When preparing for guests to arrive, Casto micromanages a meek and withdrawn Zoraida:

“You got the cakes ready? I mean, you got them out of the boxes and everything?”

Zoraida nodded, not looking in his direction.

“Hey! Coño, I’m talking to you! Answer!”

“Yes,” Zoraida whispered.

“And the cups and plates, you got them for the coffee and cake?”

“Yes,” Zoraida repeated. (18)

 Though their domestic arrangement assumes that the realm of household duties falls under Zoraida’s domain, Casto cannot fight his controlling impulse, making sure that every last detail has been fulfilled. Despite the fact that Zoraida could, even after her latest miscarriage, manage the “household chores and the children all by herself” while also finding time to “assuage Casto’s fears of sickness and prepare special foods for him,” Casto still does not believe she is capable of coordinating the dishes necessary for a small snack of cake and coffee (18). Zoraida’s quiet response infuriates him, and his
yelling stirs her to an audible reply. As this scene continues, it becomes more and more excruciating. Zoraida becomes more and more reclusive while Casto becomes more frustrated and overbearing:

‘Coño, man, what do you think I do all day out there to make a living? Play? Working my butt off in those docks in all kinds of weather…yeah. And for what? To come home to a woman that won’t even look at me? [...]

I get up every morning before six. Every freaking morning! I risk pneumonia, rheumatism, arthritis, all kinds of sickness. Working that fork lift, eight, ten hours a day, until my kidneys feel like they’re gonna split out of my sides. And then, to make it worse, I gotta take orders from that stupid foreman who hates Puerto Ricans. Calling me a spic. In fact, they all hate Puerto Ricans out there. They call me spic, and they get away with it because I’m the only P.R. there, you know?’ (19)

He is frustrated with his job at the docks where his boss and fellow employees call him a “spic,” and vents with Zoraida, telling her that after such a hard day at work, he should be able to come home to be with “[his] woman like a normal man” (19). As a working-class Latino, Casto has to deal with racism on a daily basis at his job. Because of this, he feels powerless in terms of his position in society and he takes this out on Zoraida, exerting power over her in order to maintain some sort of control. Men of color, particularly in the U.S. with its history of overt racism, violence, and implicit codes of inequality, have long experienced feelings of emasculation. Casto feels this emasculation doubly because he is not allowed to fully exert his masculine, sexual prowess over his wife in order to compensate for his social emasculation. He is angry with her because even after her
phantom lover is vanquished by Doña Digna, Zoraida still manages to evade Casto’s sexual advances by retreating to her rocking chair, where she does her “disappearing act” (19). By doing this Zoraida thwarts Casto’s attempt at exerting his power over her sexually. Casto interrupts his own rant, telling Zoraida that he cannot talk to her because she would not understand all that he goes through, or even care, because “All [she] do[es] is stay in a nice apartment, all warm and cozy” (19). Because Casto works outside of the home, and feels that he risks “pneumonia, rheumatism, arthritis, all kinds of sickness” working to provide for his family, he feels that his work is the most important, and he undervalues Zoraida’s stay-at-home motherhood. Casto’s feelings reveal many common assumptions of male-dominated social and interpersonal relationships, particularly those in a capitalist framework. The first assumption is that Zoraida, in her status as housewife and mother, is not doing “real” work. The second is that Casto should have access to Zoraida’s body for his own pleasure, as a “tool” for stress release; since Casto works and provides for his family, he feels entitled to payment—sex and affection from his woman—in return for her material needs. Casto’s sexual outlook is informed by what Ferguson describes as “the aspect of domination, the fact that men usually control the nature of the interaction itself as the sexual initiators, that perpetuates the image of women as the sexual objects of men, and women’s bodies as the instruments of men’s pleasure” (74).

Since Zoraida is not producing any tangible goods, she does not appear to be working, or at least not in the same way that Casto works. Ferguson cements this claim, insisting that “[c]hildcare is an aspect of housework that mothers perform at home while caring for infants and small children, yet […] the very idea that childcare and housework
are separate work activities is a historical development caused by the separation of the home from economic production with the development of capitalist production” (73).

Adrienne Rich also reveals the complexity of motherhood by separating the concept into distinctive definitions. She differentiates between the “potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children,” thus the experience of motherhood, and “the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). It is the institution that perverts the power of motherhood and distances “women from [their] bodies by incarcerating [them]” in those bodies. The institution of motherhood, Rich further explains, “has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” by becoming the only cornerstone from which women are defined (13). As Daphne de Marneffe affirms in her book *Maternal Desire*, by separating the connotations of motherhood in this way, Rich allows for the acknowledgement of both “the pleasures offered by mothering and its oppressive aspects” (30). Marneffe continues the analysis of motherhood, questioning the assumption that there is “something inherently disempowering in being a mother caring for one’s children,” but asserting that “full-time motherhood in relative isolation [is] created and maintained by patriarchal priorities to the psychological, economic, and intellectual detriment of women” (63, my emphasis).

So, while patriarchy and maternity are inextricably linked and work together to maintain male domination of women, maternity is also what Zoraida sometimes uses to escape from this patriarchal domination. While Casto is venting, Zoraida is so completely enmeshed in her motherly calling that she “barely hear[s] him” and disassociates, instead focusing on the “children’s voices coming from their bedroom,” which fill her with
satisfaction: “How nice, she thought, all the children playing and happy. All fed and
clean; yes it’s nice and peaceful” (20). Consequently, Zoraida does not answer Casto,
leaving his complaints and grievances floating in the air. Zoraida shows that while she is
confined in her role as “mother” in terms of patriarchal power and the resulting restrictive
gender roles, i.e. wifehood, motherhood as an experience is pleasurable to her, and one of
the few realms in which she has agency since her agency over her own sexuality is
constantly under attack. Thus Zoraida, operating within a wife/mother construction, uses
one of the components of this edifice to resist the other. Though ironic, this makes sense
considering that historically one of the only realms in which women could exercise
autonomy has been the realm of childrearing and motherhood. Of course, this autonomy
has been attacked periodically over the course of history, most notably (and recently)
beginning in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, due to the interference of the disciplines of science
and psychology, mostly male-dominated fields.¹ Zoraida’s maternal autonomy is likewise
undermined by Casto, who insists on dictating her every interaction with their children,
directing Zoraida when to “Cut some cake for the kids” and when to “put them down” for
bed (21, 31). Thus Zoraida exhibits the “double consciousness” that Ferguson describes
as the experience of women who simultaneously have “a positive image of themselves
and positive gratification from their mothering work with children” and a “negative self-
image” concerning the jealousy of the father and the inability to successfully negotiate
the two (77).

Though Zoraida’s main method of opposition is to retreat to motherly thoughts
during conflict, her entire existence is a series of quiet, often ineffectual acts of

¹ Shari L. Thurer describes this era as “mother’s fall from grace” since her natural
maternal instinct, formerly praised, became insufficient, and mothers were forthwith
advised to follow the practices advised by male experts (225).
resistance. Her phantom lover and silent retreats to her rocking chair are examples. Rarely does Zoraida verbally or assertively standup to Casto’s authority. This only occurs once in the entire story when their children are having a dispute, during which the eldest boy, Eddie, slaps and pushes the youngest boy, Junior, and falsely blames their sister, Clarita, who later takes revenge by slapping her instigating older brother. Casto intervenes hastily only after Clarita takes her revenge, suggesting that he is biased positively towards his eldest son. Casto jumps up, “grabbing his daughter by an elbow and lifting her off the ground,” and calls her a “Demonia,” or demon, while he shakes her “forcefully” (21). Strikingly, because it is the first and only time that Zoraida raises her voice in the story, Zoraida gives out a “thin shriek” which “whistles through the room,” pleading with Casto not to “be rough” with the little girl (21). Zoraida may be removed from the other adults around her, but she is much attuned to her children, despite Casto’s assertion that Zoraida “can’t even control her own kids no more” (21). Zoraida’s shriek is also another example of Zoraida’s constant, albeit feeble, resistance to Casto’s authority.

Also part of the construction of institutional motherhood is to render mothers childlike. Even though Zoraida is married and has children of her own, her husband and her parents still seem to consider her as a child that needs to be taken care of. Her mother claims that Casto, a “brute of a man,” does not “deserve anyone as delicate as Zoraida” (23). She contends that Casto “got an innocent girl, pure as the day she was born […] Protected and brought up right” (23). Zoraida’s purity has been ensured by her parents, who never allowed her to go out by herself and “always watched out who her friends were” (23). Because Don Isidro and Doña Clara have “guarded” Zoraida almost all the way “until the moment she took her vows,” Casto should be proud to have her for a wife,
because “[a]ny man” naturally would be. Every element of Zoraida’s social life has been controlled by her parents. They pride themselves on this fact, and feel that they have consequently raised a “clean, hardworking and obedient” daughter who “Never complains” (23). Since Zoraida marries Casto when she is about eighteen years old, her obedience has simply transferred over from one authority to his. What more could Casto ask for? Zoraida also looks “frail and childlike, much younger than her years” (16). Her father, Don Isidro, is “struck by [Zoraida’s] girlish appearance […] the mother of three children and she hasn’t filled out…she still has the body of a twelve-year old” (23).

Because Zoraida has been relegated to the station of a child, she is not even allowed to be an active participant in her own “cures.” In fact, no one has even bothered to ask whether or not she actually wants to be “cured,” but they have all assumed that she is either possessed or otherwise terribly ill and in need of intervention. Casto, for his part, has even neglected to make Zoraida aware beforehand that she is going to be intervened with. Instead, he consoles himself with thoughts of the “meeting he had arranged earlier in the evening without Zoraida’s knowledge” (11).

The implications of this familial teamwork are significant for a deeper understanding of machismo. Since Casto has to approach their family for help, it is evident that he cannot control his wife in the way he “should” be able to as the head of his household. In the same way that marianas are expected to cater to the needs of their husbands and children, the husbands, machos, are expected to maintain order over their wives and children. Casto’s need of assistance destabilizes his status as macho, and because he could not do it alone it shows how machismo is socially constructed and facilitated—everyone buys into the system, consciously or not, and everyone works to
enforce and uphold it. So, when the family collectively decides to visit Doña Digna, and then later to take away Zoraida’s rocking chair, both solutions work more like punishments than treatments, and remind Zoraida of her place in the patriarchal order. Further, that Zoraida’s father is the one who ultimately offers to take back the rocking chair is very significant, a notable reinforcement of the patriarchal power relations at work. Indicative, too, is the conversation Zoraida’s mother has with her near the end of the story.

After the final family meeting, Zoraida’s mother, Doña Clara, lingers behind to speak with her daughter in private, offering what she thinks to be sound and practical advice. During this exchange, Zoraida is busy washing the dishes and does not really appear to be listening:

“You have to humor men; you must know that by now. After all, you are no longer a little girl. All women go through this difficulty, eh? You are not the only one. Why, do you know how many times your father wants…well, you know, wants it? But I, that is, if I don’t want to do it, well I find a way not to. But diplomatically, you know? […] you have to learn that men are like babies and they feel rejected unless you handle the situation just right. Now, we’ll take the rocker back home with us because

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2 Purencia, Casto’s sister, is the only one who seems to truly wonder what is going on in Zoraida’s head, but she does not go out of her way to gain Zoraida’s confidence. Purencia does, however, ask that the group “[l]et Zoraida say something” because she feels that Zoraida “never gets a chance to say one word” (27). Though the story does not spend very much time on Purencia’s character, it is likely that she feels some sort of quiet solidarity with Zoraida since her own husband also takes on a parental guardianship of her, not allowing her to go “out at night” unless she is with her parents and brother. She also, as Casto’s sister, seems to have experienced being second favorite to the “precious baby boy” that was her brother. This is the extent of their relationship, however. Zoraida has no true allies, but all of her loved ones work together (albeit probably unintentionally) to further exploit her.
it will make him feel better. But you must do your part too. Tell him you have a headache, or a backache, or you can even pretend to be asleep. However, once in a while you have to please him, you know. After all, he does support you and the children and he needs it to relax. What’s the harm in it? It’s a small sacrifice. Listen, I’ll give you some good advice; make believe you are enjoying it and then get it over with real quick, eh? So, once in a while you have to, whether you like it or not; that’s just the way it is for us. Okay? Do you understand?” Zoraida turned away and, without responding, continued with her work. “Did you hear what I just told you?” Doña Clara grabbed Zoraida’s shoulder firmly, squeezing her fingers against the flesh. (30)

Again, Zoraida defensively retreats into her own thoughts, no longer really listening to their conversation. She is terribly upset about her rocker, since “it had become the one place where she felt she could be herself, where she could really be free” (29). Doña Clara’s well-meaning advice completely ignores all of Zoraida’s needs and focuses instead on Casto’s needs, because Clara believes that the woman’s role is to fulfill the needs of her husband. Zoraida’s wants and needs, Clara believes, are secondary, just as she feels her own needs are secondary to those of Don Isidro. Because Casto financially supports Zoraida and their children, Clara believes that the least Zoraida can do is to cater to his sexual needs. This is a very clear representation of Ferguson’s claim that “the power of the male wage earner versus the nonpaid housewife” reveals the “capitalist aspect of sex/affective production” (69). Because of this power dynamic, Clara explains that a woman in this situation cannot merely refuse her husband sex, but must become an
actress, playing her “part” by feigning illness or fatigue to escape his advances. Zoraida, as a working class Puerto Rican woman in an oppressive marriage, has few alternatives other than to yield to the cultural expectations enforced by her machista husband. Because Zoraida is a working class housewife with little education, she does not have the means to hire any help, and therefore does not have many opportunities to leave her domestic and child rearing duties. Her sheltered upbringing suggests that Zoraida has probably not acquired sufficient mastery of English, further preventing her from going outside of her family and community, even though both perpetuate her oppression. Her relative isolation forces her thus to rely on Casto for even her most basic needs. So, because Zoraida is so isolated, and therefore dependent on Casto, she must obey all of his desires, or else creatively elude them.

Men are, according to Clara, “like babies” and must be “humor[ed]” lest they feel “rejected.” But this infantilizing of men is very different from that to which women like Zoraida are subjected, and evokes the marianna/macho relationship. Women must cater to their men, making sure that their most primal needs are met in the same way that they would care for an infant. While women are treated like children in regards to making their own decisions and enjoying their own liberties, men are described as children who must be catered to in every way by their submissive marianna wives. This passage illustrates the countless shaky inconsistencies that women are supposed to represent in terms of wifehood, motherhood, and even daughterhood. While Zoraida is supposed to have characteristics of an innocent child, she is also “no longer a little girl.” I borrow Chodorow’s explanation of the conflicting expectations of women to explain Zoraida’s ambivalence. Zoraida’s husband and family demand that she, like other women in
patriarchal societies, be both “passive and dependent in relation to men, and active and independently initiating toward children” (177). She must be a “good” mother, disciplining and nurturing as necessary, while also dutifully submitting to the wishes of her husband. Many of Clara’s urgings stem from the presumption that she, too, has felt the same way that Zoraida feels. She, like “All women” has had to “go through this difficulty” of yielding to the wishes of men, or of quietly and cleverly resisting those wishes in “diplomatic” ways. That is “just the way it is” for women like Zoraida and Clara, and likely was just the way it was for the generations of women before them. With these arguments, Clara seems to echo the sentiments of the title of Mohr’s collection. The women in these stories continue to struggle and survive the oppressive forces of patriarchy, but also merely continue these quiet acts of subversion, these rituals, without ever really changing the structures that oppress them. Clara, as well as the other women in the story who participate in discussions over Zoraida’s body, helps to show that while it is true that women are oppressed by patriarchal constructions, women are never merely victims, but also uphold these structures. Rich explains that women, “[l]ike other dominated people […] have learned to manipulate and seduce, or to internalize men’s will and make it [theirs]” in order to “disguise [their] feelings—even from [them]sel[ves]—in order to obtain favors, or literally to survive” (68).

Mohr’s choice to tell the third-person narrative largely from Casto’s perspective works to solidify the status of Zoraida as exposed and imposed upon. Zoraida’s consciousness does not get its turn until the very end when the omniscient narrative converts to free indirect discourse in Zoraida’s own voice. The ending is very bleak,
reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” because of Zoraida’s final retreat into a fantastical unreality:

Zoraida gave the children their milk, bathed them and put them to bed. Then, she finished rapidly in the kitchen and went to bed herself. She looked over at the empty space near the window. It was gone. She wouldn’t be able to sit there anymore and meet all her suitors and be beautiful. The last time…the last time she was dancing to a very slow number, a ballad. But she couldn’t remember the words. And she was with, with…which one? She just couldn’t remember him anymore. If she had the rocker, she could remember; it would all come back to her as soon as she sat down. In fact, she was always able to pick up exactly where she had left off the time before. She shut her eyes, deciding not to think about the rocker, about Casto, Doña Digna or her mother. Instead, Zoraida remembered her children who were safe and asleep in their own beds. (31-32)

Zoraida’s rocking chair was her escape to a fantasy world in which she is beautiful, and pursued by many suitors, who court and dance with her. Without the chair, Zoraida has trouble returning to her private escape with her imagined lovers. Again, she relaxes herself by reaffirming her motherhood, happy with the fact that her children are, because of her, safe and asleep in their own beds. Her success in motherhood once more replaces her sexual disempowerment. She is an agent of her own passivity, actively “deciding” and “remembering,” but resigned to follow the roles that have been given to her. Mohr’s choice to end with free indirect discourse allows the story to maintain its third person
narrative while also allowing Zoraida a final quiet subversion, operating within the text to preserve some type of self-ownership. Though so much of her story has been told for her, Zoraida determines to continue her, albeit feeble and invented, resistance.

In the story that follows, called “A Time with a Future,” the protagonist, Carmela, is in a similar situation. She has just lost her husband of many decades to cancer and her grown children, Edna, Mary, and Roberto, are discussing what needs to be done with her. Carmela has plans of her own that she is waiting to tell them, but they feel “themselves to be in charge” of her, claiming that she is “[their] responsibility now” (44, 47). Her eldest daughter Edna recognizes that Carmela, at sixty-six years of age, is “in good health, except for some arthritis now and then” and never complains. Despite this, Edna feels fiercely that Carmela needs her children to take care of her and should not be left alone. This reversal of familial roles is another form of infantilization. Now that Carmela’s husband and patriarch is gone, her children feel that she needs someone else to take care of her, not comprehending that Carmela was her husband’s and their own caregiver and perfectly capable of making her own decisions.

Carmela, hearing her children’s “discussion about her future” from her bed in the next room, dreads the conversation she has to have with her children. Their insistence on “the relationship of mother and child” is draining to Carmela, who reflects that she has “been through their weddings, the birth of their children, marital dispute from time to time” and has always been there for them, but fears that they will ask even more from her (44). Carmela has been a tireless self-sacrificing mother and wife since she got married at sixteen, and now “want[s] the privilege of taking care of [her]self” (50).
Unlike Zoraida, Carmela firmly shakes off their needs and does not surrender to their attempts to assume responsibility over her as if she were a child. She makes her own decision to move into a fancy new apartment co-op, fully equipped with “lots of windows and […] a terrace,” and with a “drugstore, stationery and delicatessen” right on the premises. She is, she exclaims, “gonna feel rich” on the sixteenth floor (49). Even though her oldest daughter is unhappy with her decision and feels that Carmela should “be sorry” instead of happily independent after her husband’s death, Carmela embraces her new liberation and seldom thinks of her late husband, Benjamin. She feels as though she has been filled with a “sense of peace … the same exhilarating happiness she had experienced as a young girl, when each day would be a day for her to reckon with, all her own, a time with a future” (53). She is in control of her own destiny, and she realizes that it is never too late to claim ownership of her future.

The ending of this story shows a stark contrast to that of the previous story about Zoraida. By sequencing the stories in this way, Mohr demonstrates an alternate, more positive possibility for Zoraida’s story. Zoraida can break out of her quiet, selfless struggle, and like Carmela, she can reclaim her own future and make her own decisions. Unfortunately, though, the liberation that Carmela experiences is only possible after death severs her union with her husband and her children have all established their own families. It is only after enduring many years of the obligations of wifehood and motherhood that Carmela has the freedom to live her own life.

Zoraida and Carmela’s stories align with traditional ideas of women as obedient, self-sacrificing mothers, but this is not the only type of mother that is revealed in Rituals of Survival. Also significant is the story “Brief Miracle (Virginia),” the story about a
woman named Virginia, a vagrant bisexual who momentarily and “miraculously” settles into surrogate motherhood and a heterosexual domestic commitment with a recently separated and functional alcoholic Mateo and his two young children. Virginia has just returned to her hometown after a decade of being away. When she was sixteen, Virginia had run away with her English teacher, Cornelia, who gave up her teaching career in order to prevent them from being traced. Though they had been passionately in love, after five years, Virginia wanted to experience other lovers. She moves from town to town, occupation to occupation, lover to lover, and eventually finds her way back home. She meets Mateo at a bar, and the two of them become serious after one week, moving in together shortly after.

The story is third in the collection after Carmela’s “A Time with a Future,” and makes some explicit arguments about motherhood. The story opens with two men at a bar conversing about Virginia and Mateo’s relationship. They praise Virginia for being such a good mother to the children, a better mother, they say, than their biological mother, Bunny, who one of the men defends, explaining that she was “only fourteen when she started having kids […] just a kid herself” (57). The second man renounces that excuse, and argues that “motherhood is sacred” and that while “[a]nybody can be a father…it’s being the mother that means a special responsibility.” He continues that it is only natural, “the way God made things. If a woman can’t care for kids, then don’t go giving birth. That’s what I say!” (57) The exchange endures, and eventually becomes a “‘toast to…motherhood!’ ‘Para todas las madres’” (58).

Before Virginia adopts the role of mother in her new family, she first has a conversation with Mateo about her sexual history. Even though Mateo claims that
Virginia does not owe him any explanations, Virginia still feels that she must divulge to him that she has “known both men and women” (63). It is as if Virginia must reconstruct her sexuality before she can be allowed to fully embrace motherhood. Mateo’s reaction to this revelation, and then Virginia’s reassurance only solidify this necessity:

“Do you still, Virginia? I mean, if we’re going to be together…like this is getting heavy between us…” Mateo felt the blood rushing to his face. “I gotta know. Do you still desire women…sexually?”

“I desire you, honey, only you […] something else has happened to me, and it’s never happened before. You make me understand that I want more out of life than just running from this person to that other person…or living in different places. Now I want something steady and real. Mateo…someone like you. I want to settle down, raise a family. Can you believe me? Or will what I told you make a difference between us?” (63)

Besides Mateo’s obvious flushed embarrassment, the text does not reveal Mateo’s complete feelings on the subject of Virginia’s sexuality—how he would have reacted if Virginia had replied that she did, in fact, still desire women sexually. Though he later exclaims that her history is history, there is some suggestion that it is important to Mateo that, if they are going “to be together,” she leave this aspect of herself in the past. (As if Virginia could, in any time period, but especially in one week, adjust her sexuality so that she would no longer ever be attracted to another woman.) In Virginia’s response, it is evident that she feels that in order to achieve “something steady and real” (my emphasis) she must conform to a monogamous, heterosexual lifestyle. More could be said about the implications of Virginia’s choice of partner, who is known to look “like a derelict; rarely
sober, always in need of clean clothes, a shave and a bath,” and even calls himself a “miserable bum”—perhaps Mateo’s desperate need of nurturing and care further satisfies Virginia’s motherly calling (63). Mateo’s working class status also appeals to Virginia. Because she is able to “carry [her] own weight” and contribute her savings to the relationship, their relationship is much different from that of Casto and Zoraida. Whereas Casto is the sole provider of their household, both Virginia and Mateo contribute financially and work together to fix their home. Virginia resists the idea of a traditional middle-class, married heterosexual relationship, and when her and Mateo’s relationship approaches something close, she recoils.

Although Virginia craves a more stationary relationship and lifestyle, and even signs a three-year lease to prove it, these desires are often challenged by her conflicting urges to “leave, get away, [and] reach out for something different” (67). In order to calm herself at these moments, she walks around the new apartment she shares with Mateo and the children. Examining her domestic domain restores her “sense of gratification and peacefulness” and she feels that “perhaps the wanderlust that had dominated her in the past was finally over” (67). She thinks this situation is different, especially since there are children involved. Her parents are overwhelmingly pleased, and Virginia seems to genuinely want to settle down and start a family.

For many months, Virginia is loves “her new role, shopping, cooking, even fixing the apartment just the way it suit[s] her” and reconnecting with old friends. She looks forward to the day when Lillie registers for school so that she can pursue a part-time or free-lancing job to help Mateo, but in the meantime she is content with how things are. Later, the winter season brings “flus, stomach viruses and colds, keeping the children
home for weeks on end. They had all felt,” Virginia reflects, “like prisoners.” Virginia, because she is accustomed to moving as she pleases, feels the most imprisoned, and resents the fact that Mateo had begun “staying out after work […] hardly ever home evenings” (71). Mateo’s frequent and unbalanced absence only helps to further facilitate Virginia’s wanderlust.

Inevitably, Virginia vanishes without a trace, leaving Mateo, Lillie, and Sammy, who have all grown to depend on her, disoriented. The story ends with Virginia seated on a bus headed to Los Angeles, taking sleeping pills to calm her troubled thoughts. Though Virginia feels a little guilty for leaving Lillie, who “could not go to sleep unless Virginia sang to her,” she is relieved that she no longer has to be responsible for routine parental duties such as Lillie’s first communion or Sammy’s parents meetings for skipping school. She is also pleased to escape her parents’ continuous invocation of “the subject of marriage” (72).

Although Virginia is, at least according to the rumors at the bar, the best mother Lillie and Sammy have ever had, Virginia ultimately is a stark contrast to the idealized motherhood embodied by both Carmela and Zoraida. While Zoraida and Carmela attempt to escape from untenable roles only through quiet subversions or long-awaited endeavors, Virginia explicitly refuses to remain confined in any role, and resents those who attempt to restrict her. Hers is a self-selected motherhood, one that she can adopt or reject as she pleases, and she does not feel the need to tack on wifehood to the deal. There is something sad, however, in Virginia’s continuous longings. With her story, Mohr demonstrates how restrictive these roles can be, and how marginal life can be for those who do not fit easily into the patriarchal narrative of compulsory heterosexuality.
Zoraida, Carmela, and Virginia each show how Latinas cope with their oppressive situations by embracing subtle, ritualized rebellions. These women use motherhood as a catalyst through which they attain autonomy and reject the facets of institutional motherhood that attempt to control them. Although these subversions are ultimately insufficient as modes of social or personal revolutions, and often serve to perpetuate systems of patriarchal control, they allow the women to maintain some empowerment as operators in an oppressive structure, and therefore provide glimpses into the possibility of an alternate framework.
 CHAPTER 3

LANGUAGE, TRANSNATIONALITY, AND MARRIAGE IN MOHR AND DÍAZ

Thus far this thesis has been concerned with the various modes of control and subversion that occur within culturally and socially sanctioned structural frameworks in the New York/New Jersey working-class Latino (specifically Puerto Rican and Dominican) communities. This chapter will focus on marriage, which is often thought of as the quintessential vehicle of the state, as it is not only promoted and upheld by the legal system, but also serves in facilitating the management of reproduction and fertility. The married couple/nuclear family comprises the most basic unit of a capitalist economy, and as such presents wonderfully rich and interesting complications. In the works of both Díaz and Mohr can be seen instances of marriage, since both authors are very interested in the workings of human relationships and how these relationships foster/impact identity development. These marriages are often fraught with difficulties and challenge traditional ideas about matrimony and fidelity. Díaz and Mohr’s short stories indicate how the ideological constructions of matrimony and its breaching, adultery, are shaped by the notions of nation, gender, class, ethnicity, race, and citizenship, and how all of these issues work together to foster a transnational identity.

In the mainstream model, based on European immigration, the trajectory of assimilation is linear, and the progress of an immigrant’s acculturation is said to depend on how long that immigrant, or how many generations of the immigrant family, lives in
the host society. As Kim Lloyd outlines in her sociological study “Latinas’ Transition to First Marriage,” when immigrants “become further removed from the norms of their sending country and are exposed to new cultural messages through media, host society schools, and social interaction with host members,” they soon adopt these new cultural messages as their own (Lloyd 995). A primary marker of how much a person has assimilated is the acquisition of the host language. Cultural assimilation, which consists of the adoption of the clothes, food, and habits of the host country, is yet another marker of how much an immigrant has adapted to the host country. Linguistic and cultural assimilation occur separately from actual legal citizenship, but also function to indicate who is a citizen and who is not.

In the introduction of the book Caribbean Migration to Western Europe and the United States, editors Margarita Cervantes-Rodríguez, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Eric Mielants present complications to this mainstream assimilation model, which they claim is inadequately founded on the “European experience” and has consequently “systematically portrayed the United States as a society where language acquisition begins the process of assimilation” (7). While for some of Díaz and Mohr’s characters English language acquisition does begin the adaptive process, the overly simplistic linear chronology informed by the “Eurocentric myth” that the world we currently live in is postcolonial/post-imperial largely ignores the fact that the “colonial relations of exploitation and domination between Europeans and Euro-Americans and non-European people” still exists (7). Just because official colonization has ended does not mean that its legacies do not live on in America via “the racial/ethnic hierarchy (European/Euro-
American and non-Europeans), the gender hierarchy, [and] the epistemic hierarchy” among others (7).

This phenomenon is important to note, particularly when thinking about the Caribbean subjects of Mohr and Díaz’s texts. Cervantes-Rodríguez et al. claim that since the Caribbean was “the first peripheral region to be colonized by Europe” and the last to “formally eliminate colonial administrations,” these remnants of colonialism especially “continue to shape the incorporation of [these] racialized subjects” (2). The editors use Aníbal Quijano’s notion of the “coloniality of power,” which explains the implications of a universal power pattern that “relies on the concepts of culture and race as tools over colonial subjects,” as a framework to analyze the processes of immigration, assimilation, and incorporation of Latin American immigrants (2). “It is impossible,” they argue, “to understand the incorporation of immigrants and particular forms of social exclusion related to the multiple processes of incorporation” with respect to diverse Caribbean migrants “without addressing the socio-historical contexts” that inform these migrations (3). Therefore, they challenge the assumption that “non-European immigrants will eventually follow the path of European immigrants in the incorporation process” (8).

The Caribbean characters of Díaz and Mohr’s works elucidate the inner workings of these colonial remnants, though there are stark differences between even their experiences, due to gender differences as well as the different relationships between the United States and their home countries. As a Puerto Rican, Mohr’s Lali is born a citizen of the United States. However, this citizenship does not automatically gain her incorporation to the metropole, America. Rather, as Cervantes-Rodríguez et al. assert, “despite their legal status as metropolitan citizens, Caribbean colonial migrants
experience racist discrimination” and are thus treated as “second class” citizens (7). Díaz’s Ramón, who is Dominican, and therefore not born into citizenship, is subjected to the same racist discrimination, but until he gains citizenship he also experiences the fear, abuse, and other baggage that assails undocumented workers in the U.S.

If Cervantes-Rodríguez, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Eric Mielants reject the oversimplified model of assimilation, they unreservedly embrace the concept of transnationalism, which challenges the “static models of migration […] in terms of unidirectional mobility from ‘sending’ to ‘host society,’” and think of incorporation not solely in terms of “a process that encompasses the ‘host society’ exclusively,” but instead prefer a “multidirectional” approach (8). Thinking in terms of transnationality is important because, as Natalie J. Friedman asserts in the article “Adultery and the Immigrant narrative,” “[W]holesale assimilation” is ultimately impossible for immigrant characters (75). The formation of a transnational identity is a complex one, however, and operates differently in different contexts. In many works of fiction, including those works of Mohr and Díaz, transnational identities also present interesting consequences regarding the interpersonal connections of the characters.

Friedman suggests that the struggle of the immigrant to secure a transnational identity is paralleled by the “unraveling” of their intimate relationships (71). Friedman claims that after immigration, just as an immigrant’s fidelity to the national identity is severed, so too is the marital fidelity, since the hierarchies of nationalism are congruent to those of patriarchal and familial hierarchies. The basic sequence that Friedman declares is this: first the pressure on the immigrant to fuse identity with nation is removed, resulting in a fluidity of this identity. What follows is the removal of the “patriarchal expectations
of marital obligations” (74). Then, the immigrant translates, or “embodies this fluidity of identity by creatively interpreting marital roles” (74). Friedman argues that this creative interpretation of marital roles and thus the destabilizing of marital relationships “stands in for other representative acts of immigrant struggle in novels and stories, such as language acquisition and economic hardship” (71). “Adultery,” Friedman asserts, hence “becomes an imaginary space in which authors explore what happens when national and ethnic identity is destabilized, thereby shaking up notions of family life, patriarchal hierarchies, and fidelity” (71).

Friedman suggests that in some cases, adultery allows for an emotional closeness to the characters’ cultures of origin while also allowing them to move towards forging American identities. An adulterous relationship simultaneously provides the immigrant, as Friedman claims, both “an opportunity to engage in a conversation with the homeland or the home culture one has left behind” and also “a gateway to the formation of a new American identity, one that is inherently transnational and resists the idea of full adaptation or Americanization” (72). But as Mohr’s Lali and Díaz’s Virta demonstrate, marriage also potentially provides this gateway to a transnational identity.

For Friedman, adultery can occur with or without the presence of sexual intercourse. The adultery encompasses, rather, some kind of ongoing, secret conversation shared by two people. Often this conversation is sexual, but other times, the transgression is harder to pin down. In Vapnyar’s “Mistress,” for example, one of the characters, Grigory, meets a woman, Elena, in an English class and embarks on a (seemingly platonic) friendship with her. Friedman considers this an adulterous affair, because although their relationship seems innocent enough, Friedman claims that their
relationship functions similarly to the sexual affairs of other texts. For the purposes of this chapter, adultery will be similarly defined as an emotional and/or physical relationship with a person other than one’s legal spouse or long-term monogamous partner.

The adulterous activities of Yunior’s father as seen in “Fiesta, 1980,” a story in Díaz’s Drown, reveal the complex relationship between infidelity and transnationality. “Fiesta, 1980” follows Yunior and his family as they prepare for, commute to, and attend a party at his aunt’s house. There are several layers of conflict in this story; the first involves the family vehicle, which Yunior’s stomach cannot tolerate, resulting in a very messy situation every time he takes a ride. Consequently, his father does not allow him to eat on the days that they will be driving. The overarching conflict in this story concerns Papi’s most recent adulterous affair. These two conflicts marry one another when Papi takes a carsick Yunior to visit his Puerto Rican mistress’s home. Yunior narrates the story moving from the recent past to the somewhat-more-distant past. Soon, Yunior relates, Papi even takes both Yunior and Rafa to her home for meals, thus demonstrating, as Friedman asserts, that these excursions have been “normalized within his […] life” (81).

Friedman makes a very interesting argument that perhaps Papi is no longer attracted to Yunior’s mother because in this story she no longer seems to be the vulnerable Dominicana she once was. She has “transformed herself from an overly skinny, perhaps undernourished, immigrant woman (a flaca) to a well-fed, middle-class American woman who can afford to wear jewelry and cut her hair” (81). Friedman claims that Papi’s Puerto Rican mistress looks very much like “Mami in her pre-American days” when she was skinnier and seemingly “more vulnerable” (82). While Ramón’s attraction
to the thin Puerto Rican woman is noteworthy (particularly because he is said to have “favored heavy women”), it reveals something more than mere nostalgia for a more vulnerable partner or a metaphysical relationship with his homeland (Díaz 200). If anything, the Puerto Rican woman, who by birth is an American citizen, may represent Virta’s opposite rather than serve as a double of Virta’s former self. Maybe it is because the Puerto Rican woman is in fact, both Latina and American by birth, that Papi finds her an attractive alternative to Mami. Thus her body also serves, as Friedman states, as “an entrance into the past, but also a reinforcement of his American freedom and transnationalism,” but more particularly the latter (82).

Though Yunior’s mother is a marginal character in *Drown*, the narration provides enough information to outline the various stages in her development. When the collection begins with the short story “Ysrael,” Mami is overworked, spending such “long hours at the chocolate factory” that she is much too tired to take care of her two boys, so sends them to the country with family. In “Fiesta, 1980,” despite the fact that, as Friedman quotes, “The United States had finally put some meat on her,” Mami is still an “anxious” and timid woman (Díaz 24). While Friedman claims that Mami’s change in physical appearance seems to translate to a change in demeanor, Mami’s added weight does not correlate to more assertiveness. Her voice is still very meek; Yunior claims he would have to “put cups to [his] ears to hear” it (33). When Papi refuses to let Yunior eat at a party with the whole extended family, Mami does not step in and take up for him, but rather quietly “pretend[s] to help Rafa with the pernil” (37). So, once one looks past Mami’s new appearance, one finds that she has been much less “Americanized” than she seems to be on the surface. In fact, Mami still superstitiously believes that “American
things—appliances, mouthwash, funny-looking upholstery—all seemed to have an
intrinsic badness about them,” suggesting that there are many facets of American life that
Mami refuses to accept and adopt (Díaz 27). If Virta has assimilated and become more
“American,” she has done so only as much as a transnational body can, for she too, has
cultivated a transnational identity. The difference between her and Ramón is that Virta, as
a working-class woman from the poverty-stricken Dominican Republic, has used her
actual marriage to Ramón as the catalyst through which she experiences transnationality,
not an adulterous affair. Friedman thus overestimates Mami’s Americanization.

Friedman underplays Papi’s continuously constructed machismo in favor of his
transnational struggles, claiming that Papi’s liaison with the Puerto Rican woman is his
attempt to assert a transnational identity. This assumption ignores several important
details in the story. For one, Ramón has cheated on his wife before, even when she was
skinny, vulnerable, overworked, and still living on the island. After his first affair, he
moves to the United States, supposedly with the intention of bringing his family along
later. Once he is in the U.S., however, he couples with yet another woman, establishing a
life and a family with her until he finally decides to bring his original wife and children to
the states with him. Later still, once Yunior is all grown up and Rafa is long-gone, Papi
lives with yet another woman and desperately calls Mami, who is now so meek she is
almost ghostlike, a “shadow warrior,” with promises of reconciliation (94).

Friedman again separates Papi’s machismo from his changing national and
transnational identity, when she describes his first brief affair with the “puta” as nothing
more significant than just an “extension of [his] machismo” (82). Friedman argues that
Papi’s later transgressions, however, “exceed this clichéd reasoning” because his ardent
“desire to leave the island and immigrate to the United States was far greater than his desire for either his wife or his lover,” and he had been working on getting a visa to accomplish this even before Yunior’s mother learns of the affair (82). In other words, Papi’s machismo, womanizing, and desire to leave the Dominican Republic for the United States are not mutually exclusive entities. Rather, the social, economic, and political climate of the Dominican Republic directly inform Ramón’s machismo as well as his desire to leave the country to create a better life for himself. Papi’s disappointing experience in the states with racism and humiliation also further informs his machista impulses.

That Ramón is a product of the Trujillo regime is explicit, as the narrator of “Negocios,” presumably Yunior, asserts that Ramón is obsessive about his attire because “His generation had, after all, been weaned on the sartorial lunacy of the Jefe” (170). During his thirty years in power, Rafael “El Jefe” Trujillo no doubt greatly influenced the young men of the Dominican Republic whether they wanted to be influenced or not. Trujillo, described as a “tigre” by Lauren Derby in the essay “The Dictator’s Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime,” was a notorious womanizer and the archetypal machista ideologue (1116). While he did not create the seductive “tigre” nor the hyper masculine “macho” image, he certainly endorsed them both and likewise endorsed the budding machismo of a couple of generations. During his rule, too, conditions were harsh, particularly for the working-class, whose living conditions were strikingly dissimilar from the “excesses of magisterial pomp and spending” characteristic of the Trujillo regime (Derby 1112). The economic climate encouraged many Dominicans to immigrate to the United States in the hopes of a better life. Ramón, for his
part, dreams not only of making enough money for his family to survive on the island, but rather dreams of “gold coins,” of making it big in the states (169).

His dreams are dashed, though, when he experiences the country’s overt racism. One of his earlier experiences with the racist American establishment is subtle and occurs while riding with police officers. Though he had heard about the maltreatment experienced by his other undocumented friends, Ramón is lucky and does not receive any physical harassment at the hands of these officers, who kindly offer him a ride. He does, however, endure the racial slur “spik” and the blatant ignorance of the officers who mistake him for Cuban (176). Later, when he finally gets a well-paying job with “exceptional” benefits, he experiences at-the-job discrimination, as the “racism was pronounced” (194). Despite his earning of the “highest performance rating in his department,” Ramón is still subjected to horrible hours and is taken advantage of by the “whites” in the department, who expect him to willingly take on their “bad shifts” (194). If he or any other Latino worker complains, they are written up. He has learned that in order to “get anywhere” he must speak only English, and consequently makes sure not to speak “his Spanish loudly in front of the Northamericans” for the first four years he lives there (171, 197-98). Like Mohr’s Casto, Ramón is emasculated by the racism he experiences and then seeks to compensate for it by exerting power elsewhere, particularly over the women of his family and community.

As such instances show, because of their different histories of Russian and Dominican immigration, Ramón’s process of a transnational identity formation simply cannot be evaluated in the same way as that of Vapnyar’s Grigory, as Friedman does. The notion of the “coloniality of power” holds that because “Caribbean populations had been
colonized/racialized as inferior others and now migrate to their respective metropolitan and neo-metropolitan areas,” they are now also “subjected to treatment as ‘colonial/racialized subjects of empire’—that is, subjects inside the empire as part of a long colonial history” (10). Grigory’s Russian Jewish origins come with their own, unique set of complications that will not be detailed here. Nonetheless, Vapnyar’s story, and Friedman’s reading of it, is useful to consider in contrast to Díaz and Mohr’s stories; the similarities and differences elucidate some of the particularities of Latino transnationality.

Grigory does not have an intellectual or social life apart from his trips to the park with his grandson, Misha, where he merely leaves Misha to his own ends, preferring instead to read a Russian newspaper, an act Friedman suggests is a “metaphysical return to, or conversation with the old country” (83). Friedman considers the major climax in the story the part when Misha “sees his grandfather […] develop a new self-identity when he embarks on a friendship with a Russian immigrant he meets in an English-language class” (80). While adequate, this summary misplaces the emphasis of these importantly linked but ultimately discrete events. Grigory’s identity begins to change when he embarks on an endeavor to learn English before he meets Elena in class and develops a friendship with her. It is only because Grigory and Elena share this language learning experience that they have developed a deep understanding and friendship with one another. If it is true, as I believe it is, that Grigory’s relationship with English develops before his relationship with Elena, it is possible that English is actually Grigory’s mistress. Consider the story’s humorous ending, which consists of a now very talkative
Misha and Grigory on their walk home from Elena’s house. Grigory suddenly interrupts Misha’s random and excited chatter with his own thrilling exclamation:

Close to their building, the grandfather suddenly stopped, interrupting a story about comodo dragons. "Misha," he said, sounding a little out of breath. "You know what, my class won’t be over on June fifteenth. I mean it will, but I'll find another class, then another. Misha, there are a lot of free English programs in Brooklyn. You have no idea how many!" (118-119)

After Grigory begins to recreate himself as a transnational being by learning English and beginning his assimilation to American culture, he then is able to begin the affair with Elena Pavlovna—this affair serves as a further “gateway” to Grigory’s establishment of a transnational American identity, not as the primary one. What is important is not merely Elena and Grigory’s conversation, but that they share a transnational conversation—their conversations can occur only after they have become transnational beings. It is not Elena’s relationship to Russia that so captivates Grigory, but rather that they both now share a relationship to America through their acquisition of English. After all, Grigory’s own wife is still very much connected to Russia, as she continues to rely on Russian as her primary language and does not know enough English to be a candidate for the English program (an analysis worthy fact on its own). She insists on making Russian meals with Russian ingredients and only using the lids for her pots that she brought from Russia, not trusting that American lids would fit, or that cooking oil will work just as well as “chicken fat” (98). She also insists on using a “hand-operated, metallic meat grinder” that she refused to part with on her journey to the states. She is very much still connected
to the old world, also sharing Grigory’s love of reading the newspaper, which she picks up whenever he finishes. She busies herself reading the Russian “singles ads […] circling some with a red marker” to show her daughter (101). So when Friedman portrays Elena Pavlovna as some sort of savior power that restores Grigory’s masculinity, and allows Misha to achieve his own, she misinterprets the impact of Elena’s Russian heritage on their relationship and overstates the effect of their relationship to Grigory’s development as a transnational being. It is not because of Elena that Grigory becomes so enmeshed in his English lessons, but it is because of the English lessons that he has such a bond with Elena. Because Elena is, like him, becoming a hybrid individual, he is able to relate to her in a way that he cannot relate to his wife. Thus, Grigory’s attraction to Elena is similar to Papi’s attraction to the Puerto Rican woman in “Fiesta, 1980.” Neither woman is necessarily more “Russian” nor more “Latina” than the men’s own wives, but each allow the men to explore their new freedoms as transnational beings. Important here is that both Grigory and Ramón are men; as men, their process of becoming transnational is somewhat different than Lali’s process in In Nueva York.

Mohr’s In Nueva York is a collection of short stories about several characters who live on the same street in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood. The characters and situations overlap so seamlessly that the short stories work very well both on their own and together to produce a cohesive, novel-like feel. Much of the action happens near Rudi’s diner, a popular neighborhood restaurant at which many of the characters work and frequent. The collection begins with “Old Mary,” a story describing the surprising reunion of an older woman with the now grownup son she had once given up for adoption. Mary impatiently waits for William, who has journeyed to the states from
Puerto Rico to meet the mother he never knew, and is surprised when she sees that her son is a dwarf. Any doubts she may have about William’s capacity to pull his own weight are dispelled throughout the collection as he proves through his hardworking demeanor that his height has nothing to do with his performance. William begins working at Rudi’s diner alongside Rudi’s young wife, Lali. Lali unintentionally charms William “first by her sadness and then by her sense of helplessness” (128). She has just come from Puerto Rico and misses the island terribly. She and her husband seem incompatible and she is very lonely. William and Lali become friends and William encourages Lali to join an English class with him so that they can learn together.

Like Vapnyar’s Grigory, Lali, coincidently, also lives in New York, but in the Puerto Rican barrio where it is generally unnecessary for her to know English for her everyday interactions, for everyone she might encounter is likely to speak Spanish. Unlike Grigory’s wife, who knows very little English, Lali’s husband can speak both English and Spanish and successfully manages a business in America. Even though most of his customers are Spanish speaking, Rudi still has to negotiate the English speaking business and legal realms. Since Lali’s spouse knows English and has already assimilated to American life, the marital situation in *In Nueva York* is already different from that of Grigory and his wife. Another difference occurs in the degree to which the marital confines are breached in either work. Unlike Grigory, who does not seem to have had a sexual relationship with Elena, Lali actually has a physical, sexual conversation with her language learning partner by the end of the collection. For Lali, it seems as though it is not enough for her to merely share a secret, English conversation with William, but she must also consummate this conversation sexually. This suggests that while Grigory
merely needs a push to reassert his manhood and reclaim his identity, Lali’s starting place is much further behind. Rather than having lost an assertive identity, Lali has yet to develop one and therefore has to create her identity from scratch before she can embark on a transnational one. Unfortunately, Lali’s self-development continues to be informed and restricted by the system of patriarchy—all of her methods of “escape” are facilitated through her relationships with men.

Lali hopes that her marriage with Rudi will facilitate her transnational development, but her relationship with her husband is strained, at best, due to their stark age contrast and few shared interests:

Lately Rudi had begun to reflect on his decision to marry such a young woman. Especially a country girl like Lali, who was shy and timid. He had never had children with his first wife and wondered if he lacked the patience needed for the young. They had little in common and certainly seldom spoke about anything but the business. […] After almost one year of marriage, he felt he hardly knew Lali or what he might do to please her.

(65)

Rudi does love Lali, but they are not equals. He considers Lali to be an infantile creature, “like some sort of caged bird,” and admits that he “feel[s] more like her father than her husband” (147). Rudi likens his new young wife to a child when he considers that maybe his lack of experience with children prevents him from being about to connect with Lali. He is indeed old enough to be her father; in fact he is only “a year younger” than her actual father (131). Consequently, Rudi approaches Lali as though she is a child, and it
seems as though Lali has merely been transferred from father to surrogate father—a relationship that is exaggerated since Rudi is keenly aware of their age difference.

Since Lali’s parents did not persuade or force her to marry Rudi, and she chooses to marry Rudi of her own accord, an analysis of her motives in marrying Rudi may help to illuminate why the rest of the story transpires. Lali sees a marriage with Rudi as “a chance to get away—to see what was going on in other places, to life in New York, another kind of life” (131). Growing up, she had always been told “how wonderful life is” in the states and craved to learn more about the world she’d only seen on “television and the movies” (131). Even though Lali’s previous life on the island was a happy one, she still wanted to experience the world, so accepted Rudi’s proposal quite readily. As a working-class woman in Puerto Rico, Lali would have had few alternatives for going abroad other than marriage.

Thus, like Díaz’s Virta, Lali attempts to use marriage as the catalyst through which she can achieve a transnational identity. While she is successful in using marriage to actually migrate, life in the states is not what she expects, and life with her husband is awkward. In the story “Lali,” Rudi is described as “kind” but unaffectionate, “hard-working and practical, unable to see beyond someone’s most obvious need” (130). Rudi, “nervous with his young wife” and confused about her shyness, develops a “taciturn manner” with her, “causing her to withdraw even further into herself” (130). That the two only talk to one another comfortably about business is significant; in the story “I Never Even Seen My Father,” Lali is described by local lookers-on as “a little jibarita, a hick, from the mountains” whom Rudi went to Puerto Rico to find as a wife because “he knew he [would not] find nothing like that here” (43). The same speakers claim that Rudi
works Lali “to death” (43). Rudi is very conscious of these rumors and when others “accuse him in jest of overworking his wife,” he answers that he would never need to overwork Lali because she has “the endurance of a country mule” (65). Notwithstanding these rumors Rudi cares very much for Lali’s wellbeing and insists, among other things, that she “have her breakfast undisturbed” no matter how busy the diner may be (128). Rudi is not portrayed as a totalitarian dictator, but is instead shown as a well-meaning, albeit traditionally possessive and protective older husband.

Probably as a result of her uncomfortable marriage, Lali’s friendship with William becomes very strong. Since they are both recent arrivals to the mainland U.S., they both have similar levels of nostalgia and often reminisce together about their lives on the island. Neither were, of course, forced to leave home, but rather wished to seek a better life. Even though Lali and William share island memories, William is no more Lali’s only link to Puerto Rico than Elena (or her brooch) is Grigory’s ticket to Russia. Rudi is in fact Lali’s only actual link to the island, since he has promised to physically take her there on vacation. William also is not Lali’s only link to the English speaking world, since Rudi is fully bilingual. However, Rudi is fundamentally against Lali’s entrance into bilingualism, and she has to beg in order to achieve it. So it is not important in which way William links Lali to American or Puerto Rican life. It is important rather that Lali and William share both of these identities, and even more so that they have developed these identities together.

Before William and Lali consummate their relationship, though, Lali has an affair with William’s brother. Lali develops a strong attachment to the vagrant Federico and considers him to be her escape from the “stinking” restaurant and the husband she can
“stand […] no more” (148, 149). She begs Federico to “Take [her] wherever [he goes],” anywhere away from Rudi (148). Federico refuses to relinquish his “freedom,” and abandons Lali, taking with him the runaway money she collected from the bank account she shares with Rudi (149). Because Federico shows up (and leaves) quickly and mysteriously, and is strikingly similar to William, he actually functions as a manifestation of William himself. Lali’s desire for Federico is only a displaced desire for William—a desire Lali forces herself to ignore, probably only because, as a dwarf, William cannot be “just like everyone else” (Mohr 63). Because her English learning endeavors are so separate from, and contrary to Rudi’s wishes, Lali conflates her linguistic independence with a sexual independence. Consequently, since William encourages and shares Lali’s experience of learning English and therefore gaining linguistic independence, Lali has ambiguous sexual feelings for him. The English classes she shares with William allow Lali to escape from the tiresome constraints of her married life with Rudi and her working life at the diner: “For her, Tuesday meant leaving the world of Rudi, the luncheonette, that street, everything that she felt imprisoned her” (67).

In fact, Lali wishes to keep the world of her English class completely separate from Rudi. When he tries to engage with her about her studies, she is reluctant to share with him:

“Well, did you learn anything tonight?” Rudi asked her.

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, without interrupting her work. “We just talked
a little bit in English.”

“A little bit in English—about what?”

Lali busied herself, ignoring him. Rudi waited, then tried once more.

“You remember what you talked about?” He watched her as she moved,

working quickly, not looking in his direction.

“No.” Her response was barely audible. (65)

This exchange is very similar to the uncomfortable conversation shared by Zoraida and Casto that I address in a previous chapter. Rudi, like Casto, is frustrated by his wife’s distance, and Lali reacts against his forceful questions by “forgetting” the content of her class so that she does not have to answer him. Though Rudi seems genuinely interested, and continues in vain to pursue the conversation, Lali does not want to allow Rudi admission to the private world she shares with William. She looks forward to their time alone, and in the story “The English Lesson,” Lali finds “herself staring at William” longingly, admiring his “thick golden-blond hair […] slightly mussed and […] partially covering his forehead […] His wide smile, white teeth and large shoulders” (63). This moment occurs early in their friendship, but the feelings invoked remain until the very last pages of the collection. Lali feels that William, who goes by the nickname of Chiquitín, “made a difference in [her] life. He was interested in her and showed concern” (131). Because of this, Lali opens up to him, telling him about life and dreams in a way that she would never open up to Rudi. In fact, Lali hardly ever speaks to Rudi. With William, however, she speaks constantly. Rudi often even has to get William to intercede
for him. Once, Rudi offers William and Lali some freshly made rice pudding, but gets William to ask Lali “if she wants some,” turning William into the mediator (66).

Lali, like Vapnyar’s Grigory, is also reclusive, but not entirely by choice. She is by nature very shy, but her husband, Rudy, strongly discourages any external social life and she and William practically have to beg for Rudy to allow her to attend English lessons:

> It had not been easy to persuade Rudy that Lali should learn better English.

> “Why is it necessary, eh?” Rudi had protested. “She works here in the store with me. She don’t have to talk to nobody. Besides, everybody that comes in speaks Spanish—practically everybody, anyway.” (50)

The same reason that Grigory blames for his reluctance to learn English—that he really does not need it in his neighborhood—also informs Rudi’s reluctance to allow Lali to leave her job at the diner once a week to attend her own lessons. Rudi does not anticipate that Lali will ever go anywhere without him, and assumes that all of her social interaction will take place in the restaurant. Lali, in contrast, is very aware of the benefits of learning English. She sees the language acquisition as empowering, and also has the foresight to see how it can “help [her] husband in his business” (58). Eventually, after Lali has lived in the U.S. for about a year, Rudi acquiesces to and even commends Lali’s desires, acknowledging that her studies can only be beneficial and at no detriment to anyone:

> “Sure, well, it’s a good thing after all. You and Lali improving yourselves. Not that she really needs it, you know. I provide for her. As I said, she’s my wife, so she don’t gotta worry. If she wants something, I’ll
buy it for her. I made it clear she didn’t have to bother with none of that, but”—Rudi shrugged—“if that’s what she wants, I’m not one to interfere.”

(66)

Though he speaks positively about her studies, Rudi feels threatened by Lali’s quest to learn English. It is as if Lali’s desires to learn the language, assimilate, and “do more for [her]self” undermines his position (58). Maybe Rudi did not intend on marrying Lali only to help him keep up the restaurant he started with his first wife. But by resisting Lali’s individuality and her desire to learn English, he invariably reduces her from the status of wife and partner to the role of a “country mule,” of chattel. Ironically, Rudi’s resistance is somewhat justified later, since Lali’s language class ultimately results in her developing feelings for William, and later having affairs with Federico and then with William himself.

William and Lali’s relationship does not traverse the sexual bounds immediately, not until over a year later, when Lali is fluent enough that she “no longer plan[s] her sentences ahead of time, or worrie[s] about her accent” (128). It is the combination of the newly acquired social independence that language has given her along with her disillusionment with married life in the U.S. that fosters Lali’s infidelity. This infidelity, likewise, informs Lali’s development as a transnational being. In the end, though, Lali’s situation is not much changed. At first, Rudi says that she is “worse than a whore” and threatens to “send her back home to her family in disgrace,” but after his initial anger, they revert to their old business relationship and “hardly [speak] to each other” (159). Even though Lali continues to be more of a coworker and daughter than a partner and
equal to Rudi, the collection hints that Lali continues with her education, and thus continues her transnational project.

Though adultery works in different ways for both characters, Lali and Ramón each present significant complications to the mainstream model of assimilation because of their positions in the United States as disempowered raced, classed, and gendered beings. They show that while important, language acquisition is not the only, or necessarily the primary, impetus through which the development of a transnational body can occur, and that while adultery is also another potential catalyst, patriarchy, colonial history, machismo, and U.S. racism also impact the development of the Latino transnational project.


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