Living in Limb/o: Reading Dismemberment and Orphanhood in Contemporary Spanish Caribbean Literature

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LIVING IN LIMB/O: READING DISMEMBERMENT AND ORPHANHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

By

Sara Jill Gusky

A DISSERTATION

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LIVING IN LIMB/O: READING DISMEMBERMENT AND ORPHANHOOD IN
CONTEMPORARY SPANISH CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

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Seeking alternative metaphors for understanding the Caribbean experience as it is illustrated in contemporary Spanish Caribbean novels, this dissertation reexamines the region’s historical foundation of violence in order to approach the organizing metaphor of dismemberment. In the past, Caribbean writers, scholars, and theorists have looked to race and miscegenation as a vehicle for characterizing the corporeal complexities of the archipelago’s diverse identities. In this study, however, I am propelled toward broken bodies, alternative kinship models, and imperfect genealogies in order to develop an idiosyncratic vision of wholeness.

In my exploration of Caribbean bodyscapes, I establish a metaphorical connection between the body with missing limbs and the family tree with missing limbs in order to map the space of limb/o in which both allegorical and literal orphans are depicted. In the first chapter, “Breaking the Silence of Violence: Reading Herstory in La casa de la laguna and Nuestra señora de la noche,” I look at violence as a catalyst and precursor for fragmentation in the Caribbean. Rather than focusing on history, this chapter reads herstories through a third wave feminist lens in an effort to understand dismemberment literally as bodily fragmentation and metaphorically as a social construction that
disqualifies female bodies from citizenship and denies them access to their bodies, their children, and the state. The second chapter, “Broken Bodies, Broken Bloodlines: Physical and Metaphorical Dismemberment in El reino de este mundo, Del amor y otros demonios, and Son de Almendra” theorizes the broken, dismembered body and the corporeal metaphors that are used to allegorize the trauma of orphanhood in these historical fictions. The third chapter, “Mothering on the Margins: Building Adoptive Communities in Del amor y otros demonios, Son de Almendra, and Nuestra señora de la noche,” focuses on the formation of fictive families and proposes the model of an adoptive community in order to understand the bonds that are forged when traditional kinship models, structures, and patterns are turned upside down. The fourth chapter, “Breaking the Violence of Silence: Reading Music in Sirena Selena vestida de pena and Bachata del ángel caído,” integrates the intimate and entangled relationship between musicality and textuality into my study, reading music as an alternative modality for activating the process of kinning. I coin the term kinning here in order to signal the performance of kinship, a practice of re-membering that is implemented when the unspeakable communicates itself through the emotional memory embedded in musical lyrics and rhythms. This dissertation archives the violence that continues to imprint itself on Caribbean bodies while rethinking limb/o in relation to the search for a holistic identity.
For my mom, the sun on my face and the stars in my eyes.
She keeps me whole.
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I will be forever indebted to Dr. Charles Nero and Dr. Baltasar Fra-Molinero. Their unparalleled knowledge of African American and Afro-Latin Studies continues to inspire me and I am grateful for the time that I spent working with them during the earliest years of my academic career. I would also like to express my utmost respect for Dr. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, who guided me through the Caribbean's exquisite literary landscape while I was a graduate student. The courses that I took with her at the beginning of my graduate studies were pivotal in the construction and development of my critical voice. Her rich knowledge of literature is truly inspiring and I will always admire her humble brilliance.

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Introduction

In this study, I aim to provide a literary map of the amputated Caribbean body: a body that has been severed by its naturally occurring archipelagic ruptures, linguistic barriers, national identities, and cultural differences. While recognizing the differences that distinguish each island nation from its neighbor, I analyze and critique the common thread that runs through them all: a mutual history of slavery and violence and the shared experience of dismemberment. Reflective of the violent legacies that conquest, slavery, and colonization wreak on the collective imaginary, metaphorical and literal forms of dismemberment persistently allegorize the fractured history, the broken identities, and the dislocated peoples encompassed by Latin America, the Caribbean, and their diasporas.

I focus on contemporary literature written by authors from the Spanish speaking Caribbean—that is Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia—in order to illuminate the diverse authorial voices that dialogue with each other in an effort to remember the dismembered or amputated islands from which they emerge. I embark on this study in order to suture together the open wounds of a shared history—a history that embodies centuries of secrets and silences that speak to the reinvention of a conventional family grammar and the terms of dis/membership that articulate postcolonial societies in *El Gran Caribe*. In addition to analyzing the following novels: *La casa de la laguna*

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1 It is worth mentioning that all of the Cuban novels I evaluate are relics of exile—another level of dismemberment that should be considered in relation to limbo. In his essay, “The Caribbean Writer and Exile” (1978), Guyanese novelist and poet Jan Carew states, “The Caribbean writer today is a creature balanced between limbo and nothingness, exile abroad and homelessness at home, between the people on the one hand and the creole and the colonizer on the other” (Carew 453). Because of their distinct locations and exile experiences, Alejo Carpentier and Mayra Montero share a personal history of spatial amputation that accentuates the distinct depictions of dismemberment that appear in their respective works.

2 *El Gran Caribe* is a contemporary, hybridized conceptualization of the greater Caribbean basin. Launched in 1994, the term embodies the region’s diverse geopolitical and socio-cultural definitions as well as its pan-Caribbean sentiment originally put forth by anti-colonial activists, scholars and politicians such as

As I previously mentioned, I have compiled a literary corpus that comes out of Cuba, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. In an effort to give a thorough interpretation of the literary traditions under discussion, I treat the Caribbean Coast Region of Colombia as a continental extension of *El Gran Caribe* that is, in some ways, historically responsible for the unique racial and ethnic compositions of its Antillean neighbors. Sharing the Caribbean coastline and providing the main port of entry into the New World via the fortressed city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia is, without a doubt, a primordial scene of miscegenation. Located on the northeastern coast of South America’s Caribbean seaboard, Cartagena de Indias provided direct access to the Caribbean, which, throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, was

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C.L.R. James and Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, Juan Bosch of the Dominican Republic, and Germán Arciniegas of Colombia (Girvan 1). In geopolitical terms, *El Gran Caribe* encompasses “all of the islands including the Bahamas, and the entire littoral including Mexico, the whole of Central America, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana” (Girvan 2).
economically committed to and dependent on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Cartagena de Indias thus emerged as one of Spanish America’s most profitable ports for importing, holding, and distributing human cargo for a period of time that extends over three hundred years. As the New World’s main legal port of entry for slaves, Cartagena accumulated a substantial population of Africans and served as a temporary limbo space where slaves were held before being sold and distributed to neighboring countries and islands for labor. In the spirit of remapping the body and restructuring kinship, I include Colombia in a way that defies the rigid geo-political boundaries and defends the pan-Caribbean sentiment and full-bodied notion of *El Gran Caribe.*

Before engaging in any discourse that comes out of *El Gran Caribe*, it is crucial to address the groundbreaking impact of the Haitian Revolution. Lasting from 1791 until 1804, the Haitian Revolution shook the Atlantic World and instigated a dramatic shift in consciousness that permanently altered the Caribbean’s racial imaginary and collective consciousness. In spite of the ways that it is has been glorified, romanticized, criticized, or downright degraded, the Haitian Revolution presented a drama of double dismemberment that still continues to play out on the greater Caribbean stage: on one level, the Haitian Revolution dismembered Haiti from its European (French) filiation and on another, it dismembered Haiti from the dominant Caribbean historiography. Creating a paradigm of rebellion for the Americas, the Haitian Revolution had the most dramatic impact on the neighboring island of Cuba. Forced to fulfill the abandoned role that Haiti’s white planters played as the world’s largest and most profitable sugar producer, Cuba’s plantocracy found itself in limbo, falling victim to a politics of contention: while

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3 Because of time restrictions and the nature of this project, I am unable to consider the literary works of other Spanish Caribbean nations that are encompassed by *El Gran Caribe.*
the consequences of the Haitian Revolution “brought to fruition dreams of wealth and extravagance for Cuban planters,” it furthered the petulant “nightmares of an apocalyptic demise at the hands of the same slaves who filled their bank accounts” (Childs 137).

Shaking the core of Spain’s Caribbean colonies, the Haitian Revolution—while not only responsible for altering the racial and social composition of the Spanish Caribbean—undoubtedly pushed Cuba and Puerto Rico into a corner of colonialism that would delay their abolitionist designs and independence initiatives for nearly a century. While the majority of continental Latin America had already achieved independence from the Spanish Crown by 1825, Spain’s Caribbean colonies were still deeply entrenched in colonial rule and the institution of slavery until the end of the nineteenth century. Although Cuba was the last Caribbean colony to abolish slavery (1886), it was the first of Spain’s Caribbean colonies to achieve independence (1898). In contrast, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic endured decades of political limbo during which power struggles and violent transitions in authority tore at the socio-cultural fabric of each nation.

After abolishing slavery in 1873 and achieving autonomy from Spain in 1897, Puerto Rico fell victim to the imperial annexation efforts exercised by the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Moreno notes, “Puerto Rico’s unique condition as the ‘longest existing colony in the world’” and “transformation from impoverished colony to ‘miracle of the Caribbean’ through an intense industrialization campaign [during] the 1940s and 1950s” (Moreno 7) traps the island in a paradox that might best be explained by the metaphor of limbo. Suspended in ambiguity, Puerto Rico continues to dance in lockstep with the First World and the Third World, unsure of its
membership in and affiliation with each. It is a paradox in itself—an “unassimilable” (Dalleo 12) “postcolonial colony” (Flores 36).

The Dominican Republic’s history has been particularly problematic given the fact that it shares a territory with, but remains dismembered from its estranged sister country, Haiti. Lacking a “single revolutionary moment” like its Spanish Caribbean neighbors, the Dominican Republic “saw independence revoked and slavery introduced” several times, making for a postcolonial experience unlike any other in Spanish America (Fischer 133). Gaining independence from Haiti in 1844, the Dominican Republic was taken back to Spanish rule by the elite, landowner, and general, Pedro Santana in 1861. In 1865, however, the Dominican Republic finally achieved independence from Spain, but later experienced the first of several United States occupations starting as early as 1916.

I touch on the intricate histories of these islands with the intention of approaching the experiential similarities that cut across literary genres and geographical divisions. As I suggested earlier, any dialogue regarding the region is fruitless without making mention of the Haitian Revolution and the socio-cultural, political, and racial ramifications that it yielded. For that reason, I have chosen to use Alejo Carpentier’s seminal novel, El reino de este mundo (1949) as an organizing text in the second chapter of this work.

I contend that dismemberment illuminates the overwhelming presence of physical violence in the Caribbean and problematizes the politics of memory so often corrupted by the erasure and omission of Caribbean historiography. As the ultimate negation of kinship and the primordial act that conceived the Atlantic World, rape epitomizes the violent performance of power that continues to undermine the possibility of origins for El Gran Caribe. The metaphorical rape of the Caribbean body left the region mutilated and
dismembered, orphaned by all of its genealogical components: the exterminated Arawak and Carib ancestors, a violent European patriarch, and an imaginary African mother. Thus, the Caribbean is a body that reproduces other orphaned bodies, all of which allegorize “a blank slate where history can begin to be written, or perhaps a pen that inscribes history in a blank space” (Plotnik 39). This blank slate manifests as a genealogical silence that proliferates the shame and unspeakability most typically associated with the discourse of rape. Over the course of this study, I consider Elaine Scarry’s theory of the unspeakable in conjunction with J. Michael Dash’s essay “In Search of the Lost Body” in order to articulate the “dialectic between said and not only unsaid but unsayable that dictates theme, technique and ideological orientation for the Caribbean writer” (Dash 18). In addition, I suggest that these literary texts demonstrate how societies that once flourished atop a foundation of rape were destined to bear corrupted genealogies and disfigured families.

Witnessing the decimation of an indigenous people, the establishment of colonial rule, and the importation of an African population, the Spanish Caribbean has been made to reconcile the origins of its racial composition and contaminated culture for more than five hundred years. To reconcile a racial and cultural identity based on miscegenation, however, is particularly difficult when the colonial discourse of limpieza de sangre (purity of blood) and the legacy of the Inquisition pervade the historical memory. In spite of the efforts made to keep secret skeletons hidden in their respective closets, a sense of haunting manages to permeate even the most meticulously recorded genealogies and those that are nearly decrepit, giving life to scandals most often personified by orphaned characters. Often products of rape, illicit love affairs, or incest, orphans illuminated the
ultimate failure of the Inquisition to regulate the bodies and bloodlines of its tropical territories. Because the Inquisition was a machine fueled by public chastisement and humiliation, I contend that it promoted a specifically Spanish culture of secrecy that attempted to resist and defy its exhibitionistic intentions. That being said, I explore the ways in which several of the aforementioned novels grapple with the Inquisition’s legacy by drawing attention to the antagonistic relationship between disclosure and nondisclosure. I further argue that the secrets and discursive silences of each narrative work in opposition to the culture of Inquisition that continues to permeate contemporary Spanish Caribbean society.

In his book, *The Other America*, Dash asks the question, “Is what has been termed the ‘epistemic violence’ aimed at the other so destructive that the other is forever doomed to silence and can never emerge fully from the disfiguring representation?” (41). Intrigued by Dash’s word choice in this question, I am specifically interested in the way that he posits the “disfiguring representation” of otherness as a consequence of “epistemic violence.” I claim that the novels analyzed in this dissertation use physical violence and disfigurement as inverted metaphors for freeing their subaltern Others from the silences to which they are supposedly doomed. In other words, I believe that these novels rehabilitate the Caribbean’s disfigured body of history and knowledge using disfigurement itself to recuperate a past that has been battered and neglected by the dominant episteme.

By placing literary orphans and dismembered characters—whether they are literal or figurative—at the centerfold of this project, I devise a metaphor around the condition of living in limbo that accentuates the connection between a body with missing limbs and
a family tree with missing limbs. Coincidentally, the characters that are missing limbs in the selected texts are typically characters living in limbo, a limbo reminiscent of that which Wilson Harris defines as “the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures” (Harris 6). It is worth noting that Wilson Harris puns on limbo “as a kind of phantom limb which has become a subconscious variable in West Indian theatre,” dance and vodun (5). For Harris, “the limbo dance becomes the human gateway which dislocates (and therefore begins to free itself from) a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic” and seeks to perform a “dismemberment of tribes” and “psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods” (7). My application of the limbo metaphor in this project is aligned with Harris’ supersyncretic model and further buttressed by the distinct but complementary notion of “inbetweenity” put forth by Dennis Brown and the concept of “liminality” described by Hortense Spillers.4

I relate Harris’ limbo sensibility to the notion of *mulatez* that Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal’s fleshes out in her book, *Para una semiótica de la mulatez* (1990). In this text, Martínez-Echazábal configures *mulatez* as a marker of racial and social difference that positions a person of mixed race between two distinct worlds:

> En ese espacio doblemente enmarcado, se halla enraizada la imagen del mulato como entidad ‘superior’ al negro pero ‘inferior’ al blanco, como *ser* intermedio y ambivalente que oscila pero no pertenece a ninguno de los ‘dos’ mundos. (Martínez-Echazábal 8).

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4 Although not typically associated with the discourse on liminality, Hortense Spiller’s articulation of liminality in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987) is applicable to this study because it reads the Middle Passage as a limbo space in which enslaved Africans were dis-membered from everything they had ever known:

> “Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic,’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all” (72).
Oscillating between two worlds but belonging to neither one, the symbolic *mulato* emerges as a manipulated, liminal character whose differences are inscribed on to his/her body, social position, sensibility and the state of limbo that s/he embodies.\(^5\)

Throughout this dissertation, however, I consider *mulatez* as a metaphor for plurality—a plurality that contributes to the racial, cultural, social, and often sexual limbos that are conceived from multiple perspectives and sensibilities.\(^6\) In no way do I intend to limit the metaphor of *mulatez* to race, nor do I intend to conflate the model of *mulatez* with the stereotypical expectations of a tragic identity or existence. Instead, I use *mulatez* as a way to think about the ironies of membership and dis-membership as they relate to the insider-outsider experience and the plural space of limbo that certain characters occupy in the texts that I examine. I realize, however, that reading *mulatez* in such a way could lead to an essentialist interpretation of the *mulato* characters under discussion here. For that reason, I use the following questions to guide my analysis: how do the authors and their *mulato* characters accept or resist the trappings of essentialism that perpetuate pigeonholing in literature? And, how do we read beyond these subjective or stereotypical depictions when they are presented in fiction? If in fact the pigeonholes

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\(^5\) While considering the notion of *mulatez* that Martínez-Echazábal discusses, I’d like to make mention of African American author, activist, and sociologist, W.E.B. Du Bois and the concept of double-consciousness that he introduces in his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). According to Du Bois, “double-consciousness” refers to the “peculiar sensation...of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3). For Du Bois, the idea of double-consciousness arises from the experience of being a black African-American rather than a person of plural ethnicity. Based on the complexity of the characters that I analyze in this study, I find Du Bois’ theory to be limiting and thus refrain from integrating it into my theoretical framework. In other words, this project aims at moving away from theories based on dichotomies and towards those based on plurality.

\(^6\) By configuring *mulatez* within the terms of liminality and plurality, I encounter a tension between the two that seems to yield a tug-of-war dynamic. In this project, I hope to answer the question, must liminality compete against plurality or can they be embodied simultaneously and thus exist in harmony together? At this point, I am inclined to argue that liminality gives life to plurality and vice-versa.
presented in these works are an index of a specific social imaginary, then why do these authors project such an imaginary in their texts?

By interpreting *mulatez* as a signifier of the *mulato’s* curious position in the material and symbolic order (5), Martínez-Echazábal approaches a discourse on racial limbo that Antonio Benítez-Rojo articulates in his text, *The Repeating Island* (1992):

[I]n the Caribbean, skin color denotes neither a minority nor a majority; it represents much more: the color imposed by the violence of conquest and colonization, and especially by the plantation system. Whatever the skin color might be, it is a color that has not been institutionalized or legitimized according to lineage; it is a color in conflict with itself and with others, irritated in it very instability and resented for its uprootedness; it is a color neither of the Self nor the Other, but rather a kind of no-man’s-land where the permanent battle for the Caribbean Self’s fragmented identity is fought. (Benítez-Rojo 201)

Although limbo is not addressed explicitly in this excerpt, it is certainly entrenched in the subtext and re/presented as “a kind of no-man’s-land” that speaks to the uncertainty or unintelligibility of Caribbeanness that Benítez-Rojo associates with existing “in a certain kind of way.” My decision to use limbo as an organizing metaphor in this dissertation is ultimately solidified by Silvio Torres-Saillant’s essay, “The Cross-Cultural Unity of Caribbean Literature: Toward a Centripetal Vision” in which he encourages the scholar to develop the rare ability to tolerate impurities, to conceive of a space of inbetweenness, where things enjoy a sort of ontological elasticity that permits them to be neither nor that. A conceptually flexible framework alone can mange to converse with the multiplicity of components that have gone into the sociocultural formation of the people of the region and can enable the comparative literary historian to delve into the underlying congruity of disparate elements. (59)

My application of limbo denotes the in/congruent spaces of inbetweenness that materialize from the confounded racial, genealogical, and sexual identities of the disparate dismembered characters populating this project.
Scholarship dealing with genealogical tropes including orphanhood, dismemberment, and limbo in Hispanic Caribbean literature (specifically) is virtually nonexistent. With the exception of Viviana Plotnik’s chapter entitled, “Postmodernity, Orphanhood, and the Contemporary Spanish American Novel” published in *A Twice-Told Tale: Reinventing the Encounter in Iberian/Iberian American Literature and Film* (2001), Marisel Moreno’s recently published book, *Family Matters: Puerto Rican Women Authors on the Island and the Mainland* (2012), and Karen Morrison’s historical article, “Creating an Alternative Kinship: Slavery, Freedom, and Nineteenth-Century Afro-Cuban Hijos Naturales” (2007), there are few published works dealing with the particular issues that abound in this dissertation. Of these texts, Plotnik’s chapter deals directly with the orphan allegory that arises in nineteenth century Spanish American texts. She aligns herself with Octavio Paz, reading separation as a condition synonymous with orphanhood and expands on H.A. Murena’s assertion that “the drama of the Americas is a repetition of the drama of man being a foreigner in the world” (Plotnik quoting Murena 40). Additionally, Plotnik reviews Murena’s discussion of parricide as it relates to exile, solitude, and what I would label dismemberment. In Murena’s words:

> The Americas are constituted by exiles [*desterrados*] and are a place of exiles, and everyone in exile deeply knows that in order to be able to live he has to shut off the past, he must erase the memories of that world to which he can not return; otherwise, he will be hanging from them and will not be able to live. In order to live in this world, one has to burn one’s bridges, one has to disallow spiritually what one has left behind…To kill or to die, there is no other alternative. (Plotnik 40)

While Murena’s observation allows me to approximate exile and parricide as performative practices of dismemberment, I find that his theory denies dismembered exiles and orphans the agency of memory and traps them in a state of tragic victimhood.
that is riddled with trauma, vengeance, and abjection. On the contrary, I have found that
dismembered characters in the novels I analyze actually turn Murena’s observations
upside-down and prove that exile and orphanhood are in fact vehicles for recuperating
memory and performing kinship.

Because genealogic themes are fraught with complication, literary critics of
Spanish Caribbean texts have sought alternative metaphors for approaching
Caribbeanness and Caribbean identity. Benítez-Rojo, for example, employs Chaos theory
in an effort to avoid the search for origins and explain the “impossibility” of assuming a
“stable identity” within the Caribbean (27). Rather than relying on genealogy, Benítez-
Rojo favors the Deleuzian-Guattarian rhizome model and states:

no matter what reading we make of this vast and chaotic system of myths, legends, fables, old wives’ tales, and folk tales floating over the Caribbean, our reading will fall short if used as a code or genealogical vehicle to find a stable cultural origin. The same thing will occur if one relies upon systems of dance, music, beliefs, or others. (216)

As is gathered from this excerpt, Benítez-Rojo places emphasis on the stability/instability
dichotomy that is essentially driving his exploration of Caribbean chaos. I find, however,
that the tension he builds around the quest for “a stable cultural origin” calls for a bit
more consideration. A culture is never static or stable because it is a process that is
constantly reflecting the transformation of those performing it. To find a stable cultural
origin is often an impossible feat, especially if an imaginary history or mythological
system were disregarded as a potential genealogy. Because literary production—like
music, dance, or religion— is the performance of a specific cultural practice, I argue that
it retains a crucial genealogical value that allows readers and writers alike to approach an
unstable cultural origin that is constantly adapting itself to developing consciousness and shifting perspectives.

Complementing Benítez-Rojo’s rhizomatic model is a poignant discussion of the Plantation phenomenon. Preventing the Caribbean from becoming “miniature replicas” (39) of the European nations that colonized them, the Plantation proved to be a relentless machine that drastically altered the Spanish colonial landscape and established a power dynamic and social structure that would forever distinguish the region from anywhere else in the world. In addition to differentiating the Spanish Caribbean from its continental counterparts, the proliferation and multiplication of the Plantation sparked the “syncretism, acculturation, transculturation, assimilation, deculturation, indigenization, creolization, cultural mestizaje, cultural cimarronaje, cultural miscegenation, cultural resistance, etc.” that emerged from the “extraordinary collision of races and cultures thus produced” (37).

In contrast to Hispanic Caribbean literary studies, recent scholarship on literature from the Anglo- and Francophone Caribbean, as well as from North America, deals overtly with the genealogical tropes that I am exploring in my own work. In his critical text, Postslavery Literatures in the Americas, George Handley elucidates the genealogical confusion that inadvertently came to characterize post-slave societies in the New World (8). Presenting a metaphorical reading of the reproductive patterns that are responsible for crossing bloodlines and corrupting genealogies, Handley focuses on family histories and the narratives that they bear. He argues that, “genealogy, as an intergenerational and frequently oedipal drama, functions as a way of working through the complex struggle with origins and with historical process” (4). As Handley’s title suggests, his work
conceptualizes orphanhood through the metaphor of a family portrait, focusing on the ironies that characterize the struggle between the search for one’s origins and the transmission of history.

Using slavery as a jumping off point for reading the postslavery novels he discusses, Handley encourages his reader to consider this literature as a platform for understanding the national relationship to the history of slavery rather than merely understanding the history of slavery itself. Handley states,

Because stories have the power to remember the past, to shape the present, and move us toward the future, the stories we tell about slavery—in tales, poems and narratives—more directly engage and combat the forces of historiography and official memory. (187)

In concluding his text, Handley offers a brief discussion regarding the important roles that musical expression and performing arts play as the “vital, subversive means of African cultural survival and adaptation under the violence of slavery and colonialism” (186). For that reason, in addition to others, I dedicate the fourth chapter of this dissertation to a thorough analysis of contemporary musical fictions in order to demonstrate the wide reach and transtextual crossover of the aforementioned tropes as they relate to various forms of memory retrieval and formation.

The tension between creating a myth of origins and reconciling a recorded history is revisited in Valerie Loichot’s *Orphan Narratives*. In this text, Loichot structures kinship around the transmission of stories—oral narratives—that rescue and reconstruct the “dismembered” family in plantation texts (2). The transmission of these oral narratives can be equated to the transfer of inheritance from one generation to another. Loichot’s central argument is founded upon the theory that “family relationships serve as models for temporal structures and define the nature of narrative authority” (4).
Although Loichot’s study focuses on orphan narratives within the context of plantation texts from postslavery America and the Francophone Caribbean, I believe that the argument developed in the following excerpt is closely aligned with my own and readily applicable to the contemporary Spanish Caribbean context:

The trope of the orphan does not aim to maintain plantation or post-plantation subjects in perennial position of victims. On the contrary, orphans are active performers in family reconstruction…[they] create and master their family narratives. The possession and control of these family stories prove that they belong to these families, that they have families. (3)

By inserting themselves into a familial landscape or building a community around the narratives that they create, orphans, according to Loichot, reconstruct the kinship structures that they were genealogically denied. Loichot refers to this process as “fictive kinship,” a term borrowed from Orlando Patterson’s sociological conceptualization of the “master/slave family model” (3). Patterson’s “fictive kinship” paradigm is split between two modes of kinships that include “adoptive” relations and “quasi-filial” relations, both of which are explained as follows:

Fictive kin ties that are adoptive involve genuine assimilation by the adopted person of all the claims, privileges, powers, and obligations of the status he or she has been ascribed. Fictive kin ties that are quasi-filial are essentially expressive: they use the language of kinship as a means of expressing an authority relation between master and slave, and a state of loyalty to the kinsmen of the master. (63)

Loichot’s model differs from Patterson’s in that it focuses on “models that often bypass the master/slave, father child relationship” (3). As Loichot explains,

First, slaves or subjects in a subordinate position imagine fictive kinships not imposed by the master or the master-text. Second, fictive kinships follow paths other than filial, privileging siblinghood to motherhood or fatherhood, inverting power relations between parent and child and between men or women. In this model, the authority of the father, as that of the master, is challenged. Third, these fictive kinships use modes of transmission such as writing and fiction, which create innovative family patterns. (3)
While Loichot locates family at the forefront of his study, it looms in the background of my own, for I intend to focus on the individualized orphan experience and the broken or missing limbs of the genealogy that bears it. In regard to the characters that I decipher in this work, the trending experience of being an orphan in limbo forces them to plant a fictive family tree that completely defies the patriarchal paradigm enmeshed in the master-slave relationship. In fact, most of the fictive kinship structures that I identify throughout this study are almost always built upon a female foundation. I elaborate on this observation in the third chapter. In addition, the fictive kinship model that I develop relies on oral, textual, and musical narratives to devise and perpetuate nontraditional family patterns that might otherwise be neglected or denied.

My understanding of kinship as it applies to this study is informed by the works of Saidiya Hartman, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Butler, and Pierre Bourdieu. While not every aspect of the models they offer concurs with one another or my own for that matter, their diverse perspectives on kinship, community, and affiliation allow me to devise a community model that coincides with the discourse of dis/membership that I exercise. I draw on Saidiya Hartman’s argument that a community is the performance of affiliation networks. Within that performative space, sacred bonds are forged across borders of racial, socio-cultural, and gender differences. As Hartman states in her decisive text, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997):

> the networks of affiliation enacted in performance, sometimes referred to as the ‘community among ourselves,’ are defined not by the centrality of racial identity of the selfsameness or transparency of blackness nor merely by the condition of enslavement but by the connections forged in the context of disrupted affiliations, sociality amid the constant threat of separation, and shifting sets of identification particular to site, location and action. In other words, the ‘community’ or the networks of affiliation constructed in practice community was the expression of race— but are to be understood in terms of
the possibilities of resistance conditioned by relations of power and the very purposeful and self-conscious effort to build community. (Hartman 59)

Just as the “yearning to be liberated from the condition of enslavement facilitate[d] the networks of affiliation and identification” (Hartman 59) described above, so does the common desire to re-member a dismembered past regardless of social class, skin color, or sexual orientation. I apply Hartman’s argument to my analysis in order to better understand the performative affiliations that authors create through the process of writing against the grain of genealogy and weaving in a popular discourse that unites both high and low art forms.

The critical texts and theories reviewed above provide a variety of stimulating and insightful perspectives for reading and understanding the legacy of slavery and the revised structures of kinship that persist in contemporary Caribbean societies. In order to best articulate my interpretation of the bonds being forged across lines of social class, culture, ethnicity, race, age and gender, I propose the model of the adoptive community that pulls from the diverse paradigms analyzed above. In naming this model, I chose the word “adoptive” to play off of the trope of orphanhood and to defy any biological notions of filiation that might otherwise be associated with the concept. In the third chapter of this dissertation, I map out the adoptive community, a non-racially affiliated matrifocal structure, in great detail.

Seeking alternative metaphors for understanding the Caribbean experience as it is illustrated in the novels mentioned above, this dissertation reexamines the region’s historical foundation of violence in order to approach the organizing metaphor of dismemberment. In the past, Caribbean writers, scholars, and theorists have looked to race and miscegenation as a vehicle for characterizing the corporeal complexities of the
archipelago’s diverse identities. In this study, however, I am propelled toward broken bodies, alternative kinship models, and imperfect genealogies in order to develop an idiosyncratic vision of wholeness. Organized thematically into four chapters, this dissertation rethinks limb/o in relation to the search for a holistic identity.

In the first chapter, “Breaking the Silence of Violence: Reading Herstory in La casa de la laguna and Nuestra señora de la noche,” I look at violence as a catalyst and precursor for fragmentation in the Caribbean. By using violence as a frame for understanding dismemberment (bodily, metaphorical, or textual), I approach the unavoidable foundation of violence upon which the Caribbean was discovered, conquered, and colonized, thus creating a genealogy of violence that informs my reading of the works included in this dissertation. Rather than focusing on history, this chapter reads herstories through a third wave feminist lens in an effort to understand dismemberment literally as bodily fragmentation and metaphorically as a social construction that disqualifies female bodies from citizenship and denies them access to their bodies, their children, and the state. Looking at La casa de la laguna alongside Nuestra señora de la noche, this chapter sets out to explore why secrets and silences remain at the core of the Spanish Caribbean’s literary consciousness. Because so many historical and genealogical archives were lost in the water or quite literally left for dead in the Middle Passage, the kinship structures, much like the communal narratives from which they emerge, are fragmented and haunted by family secrets and profound silences that are specific to the production of the greater Caribbean. In an effort to approach the power-knowledge dynamic that colonial secrecy and silences yield, I navigate these texts
with an historical compass that points towards the foundational act of rape, the legacy of the Inquisition, and the cult of patriarchy.

The second chapter, “Broken Bodies, Broken Bloodlines: Physical and Metaphorical Dismemberment in *El reino de este mundo*, *Del amor y otros demonios*, and *Son de Almendra*” theorizes the broken, dismembered body and the corporeal metaphors that are used to allegorize the trauma of orphanhood. My analysis pulls from Dash’s essay, “In Search of the Lost Body,” and echoes the sentiment that

>The body is an endlessly suggestive sign through which the process of ‘subjectification’ is mediated and expressed. Corporeal imagery in the Caribbean indicates the tensions that underlie the process of self-characterization, of the *récupération de soi* in the individual imagination. The ever shifting, unstable relationship between body and non-body, between dis-membering and re-membering, is a continuous aesthetic and thematic concern.” (Dash 20)

I establish a metaphorical connection between the body with missing limbs and the family tree with missing limbs in order to map the space of limbo in which both allegorical and literal orphans are depicted. In doing so, I analyze Carpentier’s novel, *El reino de este mundo* (1949) along with García Márquez’ *Del amor y otros demonios* (1994) and Montero’s *Son de almendra* (2005). As points of departure for excavating the historical roots of corporeal vulnerability, these novels convert Caribbean bodies into sites of violence that endure physical and metaphorical forms of amputation. I argue that these texts—*El reino* in its account of the Haitian Revolution, *Del amor* in its depiction of the Inquisition, and *Son de Almendra* in its portrayal of pre-revolutionary Cuba —offer an explicit, contemporary commentary demonstrating how hostile histories compromise the stability of family structures and the volatile human body. I draw attention to the fact that these novels are historical fictions in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness and timelessness of bodily tropes. As Dash explains,
The use of corporeal imagery as an index to the process of self-formation is extensive in Caribbean literature. There are no chronological linguistic or ideological barriers to the Caribbean writer’s use of the image of the body in dealing symbolically with the issue of ‘subjectification’. (Dash 21) I propose that Carpentier, García Márquez, and Montero use broken bodies to symbolize the fragmented histories that haunt the collective genealogy of the Spanish Caribbean. As Michel Foucault states in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,”

“Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (139). Riffing on the trope of the palimpsest and emphasizing the confounded elements of a genealogy, this statement coincides with the idea that history, regardless of its form, is a genealogy of fragmented memories that have been fabricated and manipulated by the treachery of time. Focusing on the violence that continues to nurture the “impossibility of origins” (Hartman 76) and the disfigurement of the heteronormative nuclear family, this chapter plants the seeds for the adoptive communities that sprout in the following chapter.

The third chapter, “Mothering on the Margins: Building Adoptive Communities in Del amor y otros demonios, Son de Almendra, and Nuestra señora de la noche,” discusses the role of marginalized, dismembered women and the racialized spaces that they occupy as domestic servants, sex workers, exploited performers, and madrinas. I draw from Patricia Hill Collins’ notion of “othermothers” and Jenny Sharpe’s discussion of the diverse historical roles of slave women in order to apprehend the ways in which the social history of the Spanish Caribbean facilitates and encourages a disfigured depiction of the traditional, patriarchal family. In this chapter, I pay particularly close attention to the fictive families or adoptive communities that emerge when traditional kinship models,
structures, and patterns are turned upside down. I discuss the irony that is engendered in the fact that the presence of marginalized female figures, specifically women in the realm of domesticity, undermine the cult of patriarchy by assuming the central role in the lives of the children that they raise or the abandoned bodies that they nurture. Throughout this chapter, I borrow Collins’ concept of “othermothers” to refer to the women who transition from madrina to matriarch when “Children orphaned by the sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty, or children who for other reasons have been rejected by their bloodmothers” (Collins 48). I explore the roles that “othermothers” fulfill as matriarchal figureheads, gatekeepers, allies, and mentors within the plural and often dismembered spaces that they inhabit. Occupying the fringes of society, the kitchens and basements, the cellars and dance halls, the brothels and dressing rooms, all of the characters analyzed in this chapter illuminate the ways in which the social environment and familial structures of the Spanish Caribbean facilitate and perpetuate the adoptive communities that appear in each body of work.

In the fourth chapter, “Breaking the Violence of Silence: Reading Music in Sirena Selena vestida de pena and Bachata del ángel caído,” I foreground the importance of musicality in the works of Santos-Febres and Antonio Valdez. Directing my attention to the intimate and entangled relationship between music and literature in the Hispanophone Caribbean, I build this chapter upon a counter-canonical foundation that merges the orality of popular culture and the textuality of the written word. I apply Dalleo’s observation that music in the contemporary Caribbean literary field (specifically at the end of the twentieth century) dismembers literature from the literary, which in turn
amputates musical texts from the traditional literary canon while making them more accessible to the public sphere. According to Dalleo, “Positioning music as voice of both the public and an oppositional counterpublic re-creates the anticolonial ideas of the literary...and becomes a way to create a public role for an increasingly privatized literary field” (202). I suggest that music gives pain and memory a voice within the novel, just as it does outside the space of the novel.

Searching for alternative metaphors to unpack the historical inscriptions of violence on the memory and the body, I use music as a modality for activating the process of *kinning*. I have coined the term *kinning* here in order to signal the performance of kinship, a practice of re-membering that is implemented when the unspeakable communicates itself through the emotional memory embedded in musical lyrics and rhythms. As a phantom limb, music marks a site of memory that offers recourse to the victims of silence and violence. Working in opposition to the Western notion of the “talking cure” or talk therapy, the silences in these novels operate as a mechanism of psychological suppression and surface as a precursor and product of violence. Ultimately breaking the violence of silence, music becomes an appropriate territory upon which characters build genealogies and fictive kinship structures that redress the various forms of dismemberment that they have suffered in the past. Finally, this chapter considers how music creates a collective memory, a shared past, and an accessible voice for the characters who had previously repressed their emotional reserves.
Chapter 1. Breaking the Silence of Violence: Reading Herstory in *La casa de la laguna* and *Nuestra señora de la noche*

Cuantos más años vivimos, más cicatrices llevamos dentro... Hay un veterano de guerra oculto dentro de cada uno de nosotros; algunos hemos perdido un brazo, otros una pierna o un ojo; pero todos hemos sido golpeados por la vida. Como no podemos crecernos un brazo o un ojo de vuelta, tenemos que aprender a vivir sin ellos.


Excavating the wounded warrior that cohabits every vulnerable body, Rosario Ferré establishes corporeal violence as a frame for understanding the prevalence of dismemberment—physical, metaphorical, and textual—in the Caribbean imaginary. Through this literary reimagining of the Caribbean body, Ferré encounters dimensions of affect and experience that initiate a productive tension between corporeal wholeness and fragmentation. This epigraph pays homage to broken bodies while speaking back to the unavoidable foundation of violence upon which the Caribbean was discovered, conquered, and colonized. In this chapter, I look at violence as a catalyst and precursor for fragmentation in Rosario Ferré’s *La casa de la laguna* (1996) and Mayra Santos-Febres’ *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006). In the spirit of feminist writing, these novels take on the task of speaking the unspeakable by depicting violence against the female body and psyche via rape, physical abuse and violation, in/voluntary abortion, and in/voluntary or accidental sterilization. Because of the unspectacular, unreported, and commonplace instances of these acts of violence, I read the secrets and silences that they breed through the lens of Saidiya Hartman’s “scenes of subjection,” which strips instances of violence and subjection bare in order to reveal their often mundane nature. Much like third wave Caribbean women’s writing, Hartman’s project exposes the
indiscriminatory character of violence and demonstrates its permissibility within the quotidien contexts of women’s lives.

Because Ferré and Santos-Febres are representing different generations, racial affiliations, and socio-cultural experiences, their works dialogue with each other in a way that demonstrates the movement or progression from one wave of Caribbean women’s literature to another. As Donette Francis elucidates in her article, “Uncovered Stories: Politicizing Sexual Histories in Third Wave Caribbean Women’s Writing,” the first wave of Caribbean literature (1960s-1970s) took an anti-colonial approach to integrating women into the nationalist narratives, while the second wave (1980s-1990s) underscored the “the painful lengths young women had undergone in their quest to fit into the nation only to remain marginal in the society’s constitution” (Francis 64). As a founder of Puerto Rico’s first wave, it is clear that Rosario Ferré’s La casa de la laguna is a product of the second. In contrast to Ferré, Santos-Febres departs from the first and second waves of Caribbean women’s literature by contesting racial binaries and exposing the indiscriminate nature of sexism and the sexual politics that it yields. Rather than focusing on history, this chapter reads herstories through a third wave feminist lens in an effort to understand dismemberment literally as bodily fragmentation and metaphorically as a social construction that disqualifies female bodies from citizenship and denies them access to their bodies, their children, and the state. In doing so, these novels direct the reader’s attention toward the cult of patriarchy, questioning the myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña in an effort to re-imagine the role of women in Puerto Rican literature.

In her book, Family Matters, Moreno evaluates the use of the family metaphor in post 1970s Puerto Rican women’s narratives. Focusing on the ways in which female
authors are “questioning, challenging, and sometimes invalidating the inherited paradigm of la gran familia” (9), Moreno employs the myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña as a vehicle for understanding the ways in which Puerto Rico’s past is romanticized and criticized in Puerto Rican literature. Dating back to the hacienda system that was institutionalized under Spanish rule during the late nineteenth century, the myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña grew out of an ethos of paternalism that configured the motherland as a “socially stratified family” with “shared citizenship” (Moreno 29). What started as “a revolutionary (anticolonial) concept” used to fortify the Partido Liberal Reformista (Liberal Reformist Party) in 1870 eventually took an ironic turn “in the future, as the descendants of [la gran familia] embraced the old colonial metropolis as a strategy of resistance to the new American colonial power” (30). La gran familia was recuperated and revitalized throughout the first half of the twentieth century, often carrying with it a “patriotic rhetoric” that integrated blacks and mulatos in an effort to expand the criollo elite’s political base (30). Additionally, the myth of la gran familia played a “pivotal role” in “the nation-building project of island intellectuals” and “bourgeois writers of the 1930’s” (32) as well as in the nation-family narrative that was driving the socio-political rhetoric of the 1950’s. During the 1970’s, however, female, homosexual, and black writers started to infiltrate Puerto Rico’s literary scene, contesting the infamous myth that had been excluding them from its narrative for generations. One of the most influential female writers to come out of this movement was Rosario Ferré.

La casa de la laguna

As a pioneer of Puerto Rican female prose writing, Rosario Ferré paved the way for contemporary women authors who had been previously excluded from the island’s
literary canon. Born in Ponce, Puerto Rico in 1938 to one of the island’s wealthiest white families, Rosario Ferré was educated between the island and the mainland, receiving her bachelors degree from Manhattanville College, her masters degree the University of Puerto Rico, and her doctorate from the University of Maryland. In 1972, while working on her master’s degree, Ferré co-founded the short-lived but highly influential literary magazine, *Zona de carga y descarga.* Not only did *Zona* provide a literary forum for Puerto Rico’s *independentista* youth, it also sparked a critical literary dialogue between young marginalized writers across the diaspora. Cutting across literary genres and canonical boundaries, the magazine created an alternative space in which counter-canonical writers could cultivate works ranging from short stories and essays to novels and poetry.

Ferré emerged on the literary scene as a female author that embodied the complicated limbo of bilingualism, biculturalism, and dual citizenship that continues to characterize the experience for Puerto Ricans at home and in the diaspora. Her literary career began in Spanish and her first collection of short stories “Papeles de Pandora” was published in 1976. In 1985, Ferré’s first book, *Maldito Amor,* was published in its original Spanish-language. As an author committed to bilingualism and to the experience of living in a linguistic limbo, Ferré self-translated *Maldito Amor* into English, and published it as an English-language text under the title *Sweet Diamond Dust and Other Stories* in 1989. In 1995, Ferré wrote and published her first English-language novel, *The House on the Lagoon,* which was followed one year later by her Spanish-language novel,

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7 In 1972, Ferré founded *Zona de carga y descarga* in collaboration with Manuel Ramos Otero and her cousin Olga Nolla. Although the publication only ran until 1975, it secured a space for “pro-feminist, pro-homosexual, and anticolonial” writers and texts to challenge the “patriarchal and paternalist establishment that had silenced them” (Moreno 20).
La casa de la laguna. From that point on, Ferré has been publishing her fiction in English and Spanish (as opposed to publishing in Spanish and English), provoking a great deal of controversy around her linguistic loyalties and affiliations. In spite of the controversy, Moreno suggests that Ferré’s decision to publish both Spanish-language and English-language texts speaks to the “possibility of a bilingual Puerto Rican canon” (22).

In the case of The House on the Lagoon, its original publication in English has been interpreted as a shift in Ferré’s political views regarding the status of Puerto Rico. In spite of content or subject matter, Ferré’s Spanish-language texts have been associated with her independentista perspective while her more recent English-language publications have come to reflect her affiliation with the United States and the neo/colonial machine that it represents in the split Puerto Rican imaginary. In his dissertation entitled, “Secret-Keeping and Secret Knowledges in the Caribbean: Literature and Anthropology of the 19th and 20th Centuries,” Marc Brudzinski examines the role that language plays as a vehicle for secret-keeping in Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon. In doing so, Brudzinski looks beyond the confines of the novel and considers the language decisions that were made on behalf of the author herself:

Ferré describes her own initial selection of English to be [the] first language of publication as a purely pragmatic choice, designed to gain an international readership for her work—one that she would not attract, even in Spain, as a Spanish-language author. She therefore insists that the two versions are original and, to an extent then, autonomous. The English-language text and the Spanish-language text are then two separate novels to be read independently of each other, since the language of each one’s composition ‘dictated’ for the author a different perspective. (119)

Moreno discusses the hispanophilia that emerges from the relationship between language, literature, and nation in the context of Puerto Rican literature. She considers Gregory Jusdanis’ assertion that the expression of a nation’s individuality is firmly fixed in language and develops her discussion around the role that language plays as main criteria for canonical status in Puerto Rican letters (48). Spanish-language literatures that remain unadulterated by English or Spanglish (the linguistic products of neo/colonial assimilation or U.S. infiltration) constitute high art and are therefore worthy of a place in the national canon (48).
Having received very little critical attention in comparison to its English-language counterpart, *La casa de la laguna* has been scrutinized for the way that it strays away from certain details, offering something other than a direct translation.

Rosario Ferré’s Spanish-language novel, *La casa de la laguna*, recounts the intricate histories of the Mendizábal and Monfort families in Puerto Rico alongside the complicated political history of the island itself. Writing a text within a text, Ferré designs a metafictional novel that presents a geneo-political narrative told through the voice of the narrator, Isabel Monfort Mendizábal, in addition to a competing narrative that chronicles the disapproving and paranoid concerns of her husband and harshest critic, Quintín Mendizábal. I have chosen to analyze Ferré’s Spanish-language version of the novel in an effort to draw attention to the violence of language—specifically that of Isabel’s domineering husband, Quintín—that simultaneously dismantles and perpetuates the system of secrecy and the dynamics of power driving the text’s metanarratives.⁹ In her interview with Gema Soledad Castillo García entitled, “In Between Dos World” (2005), Ferré acknowledges the ways in which language changes the context, content, and/or characters of a translated text. With respect to *La casa de la laguna*, Ferré explains that

> Quintín es mucho más iracundo, más fuerte, más implacable en español; en inglés se vuelve un poco más patético…En inglés, [él] se vuelve más enternecedor y, hasta cierto punto, es digno de compasión, mientras que en español es aterrador. Al cambiar de lengua, cambia la perspectiva y se llegan a enfriar los conflictos. (García 239)

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⁹ Throughout the course of this chapter, I refer to previous scholarship that stems from studies based on the English-language text because of its critical prominence and the fact that both texts venture into the same thematic territory.
Based on this explanation, I evaluate Quintín’s character as a purveyor of the textual and physical violence that appears throughout Ferré’s historical fiction.

My reading of Rosario Ferré’s *La casa de la laguna* reconfigures the inseparable genealogical and political histories of the Mendizábal and Monfort families in Puerto Rico as an isolated body of knowledge or a microcosmic episteme that becomes a metaphor for the history of the greater Caribbean. Because Puerto Rico’s political history is so deeply entrenched in the genealogical history of the Mendizábal and Monfort families, I will refer to their entangled relationship as “geneo-political” in an effort to capture their allegorical symbiosis or dependency on each other.

Puerto Rico’s political drama takes the main stage in *La casa de la laguna*. By placing Puerto Rico’s political limbo at the center of her novel, Ferré seems to be approximating a limbo experience that mirrors her own. In constant search of an identity that exists “entre dos aguas,” Ferré grounds herself in motherhood, which she explains in her interview with García:

> uno puede realizar o identificarse con muchas cosas. En una misma persona se pueden etrecruzar muchas lenguas, muchas culturas, y muchas identidades. Eso nos pasa siempre a las mujeres. Tenemos muchas caras, muchos roles que desempeñar, algunas por nuestro deber, otras por nuestra necesidad, o simplemente porque es lo que nos gusta hacer. Pero creo que si algo me define, diría que fue primero ser madre. (García 235)

Much like Rosario Ferré herself, the nation, as it is presented in *La casa*, attempts to ground itself in the family, just as the family hopes to identify through the nation. The search for a harmonious geneo-political identity is problematized, however, because of the conflicting ideas and imaginings of what the nation embodies and entails. As Ferré demonstrates over the course of her novel, the family and the nation remain inseparable;
the political sphere infiltrates the domestic, violently tearing at the family foundation and eventually splitting it down the center, much like the island itself:

Cada cuatro años, al llegar la época de las elecciones, la Isla se dividía en dos: la mitad votaba por la estadidad, y la mitad por el Estado Libre Asociado y la independencia. El miedo mantenía a la isla equilibrada sobre el filo del cuchillo…Miedo a escoger por fin un camino, a abandonar la esquizofrenia colectiva. Después de todo, votar a medias era una manera de no decidirse. La polémica sobre si éramos puertorriqueños o americanos, sobre si debíamos hablar español o inglés, se había prolongado tanto que nos había atarantado el seso. (Ferré 382)

Desperately grappling with the island’s unusual experience of being stuck in between the first world and the third world, statehood and independence, English and Spanish, Isabel translates Puerto Rico’s limbo into a romance that configures the island as “una novia siempre a punto de casarse” (197). Conflating romance and patriotism, Isabel’s interpretation of limbo reveals an underlying “desire for domestic happiness that runs into dreams of national prosperity” (Sommer 7) much like the foundational fictions that Doris Sommer analyzes in her pivotal text, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Nevertheless, Isabel’s history is corrupted by political terror and patriarchal violence. Rather than portraying a seamless national/familial consolidation, Isabel’s novel fleshes out the power struggle operating at the core of the colonial legacy. As Jessica Magnani describes in her article entitled, “Colonial Subjects, Imperial Discourses”:

Isabel’s joining of national and familial beginnings also reproduces the masculinized imagery of colonialism and conquest. Despite the novel’s obvious efforts to ‘marry’ American and Spanish colonization and so dramatize Puerto Rico’s colonial foundations, the text clearly casts the island as feminine subject caught in the midst of a battle for domination. (162)

Puerto Rico’s sustained political limbo undermines the possibility of a national romance and eventually corrupts the geneo-political history that Isabel is trying to capture
in her narrative. Because foundational fiction is typically grounded in patriarchal ideals, *La casa*, in its very contestation of those ideals, cannot resolve conflict with the “pretty lies of national romance” (Sommer 29). Instead, the novel subscribes to the allegory of the “impossible romance.” In her book, *Puerto Rican Nation-Building Literature*, Zilkia Janer contends “impossible romance” articulates “the incapacity to satisfactorily define the relationship between different sectors of Puerto Rican society and the colonizers as lovers who cannot agree on the terms of their love relationship in spite of mutual attraction” (Janer 7). Wrought with violence and terrorism, the novel depicts a generational cycle that is always contaminated by a political conversation that never reaches resolution. Secrets and silences grow to new heights in an effort to suppress political controversy in the domestic and public domains, as is demonstrated by Aristide’s flight and Manuel’s estrangement from his family and the house on the lagoon. It is through these secrets and silences that patriarchy becomes a vehicle for violence in the domestic space, while politics becomes a vehicle for violence in the public.

I would like to note that the novel opens and closes with scenes of violence, both of which are indicative of the violence and violation that permeate the entire text as well as the history of Puerto Rico and the greater Caribbean. The preface entitled “El pacto entre Isabel y Quintín” introduces Isabel’s narrative voice through the advisory words of her late grandmother:

Mi abuela siempre me decía que, cuando una se enamora, hay que mirar muy bien cómo es toda la familia, porque de los palos suelen nacer las astillas y una desgraciadamente no se casa con el novio nada más sino con los padres, los abuelos, los bisabuelos y toda la maldita madeja genética que lo antecede. (Ferré 15)
Although Isabel refused to believe her grandmother’s warning at an early stage of her relationship with the hotheaded and violent Quintín Mendizábal, she does in fact take the words to heart once she decides to test her writing skills and exercise her creative desire by documenting a multigenerational history of her roots and those of the family into which she married. Before acquainting the reader with that endeavor, however, Isabel describes a disturbing scene in which Quintín nearly whips a teenage boy to death for innocently serenading his fiancée. The rampant jealousy and violent performance of patriarchy that Quintín delivers in this whipping scene is reminiscent of a slave driver on a power trip. Desperately trying to prove his ownership of Isabel, Quintín emerges from the novel’s onset as a violent descendent of his hostile predecessors: “Él no quería ser como su padre, su abuelo y su bisabuelo, quienes todos habían heredado el genio atravesado de los conquistadores y, lo que era peor, lo tenían a mucha honra” (17). Although Isabel considers reading Quintín’s senseless act of violence as a bad omen, she dismisses it and unknowingly perpetuates the violence that the Mendizábal bloodline breeds when she bears him their first and only son together, Manuel—a passive child that transforms into a violent independentista aligned with the terrorist group, AK 47. The novel’s preface presents a question that I would like to confront before addressing the irony driving the mantra—“El amor es el único antídoto seguro contra la violencia” (17)—upon which Isabel and Quintín’s anti-violence pact is founded: is violence hereditary? By opening and closing the novel with violence, Ferré suggests that violence is inevitable and therefore void of resolution.

Following Ferré’s suggestion that violence can only be resolved with violence, I configure the information recorded in Isabel’s manuscript as a microcosmic episteme. I
argue that Quintín’s metacommentary, which appears in a secret and somewhat voyeuristic fashion alongside Isabel’s historical narrative, unleashes a wave of epistemic violence that is meant to belittle and discredit his wife and the knowledge that she possesses and reveals in her herstory, La casa de la laguna. As Gaytri Spivak explains in her pivotal text, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” epistemic violence is a tool for silencing marginalized groups in an effort to destroy a system of knowledge that was not previously established or implemented by colonial powers. Echoing Foucault’s understanding of epistemic violence as the “complete overhaul of the episteme,” Spivak examines epistemic violence in order “to offer an account of how an explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (Spivak 281). Although I am applying this framework to a metaphorical epistemic microcosm, I believe that it offers an interesting lens through which we can read Ferré’s novel as an historical fiction that documents far more than Puerto Rico’s geneo-political drama.

From Quintín’s metatextual debut, the reader learns that he holds a masters’ degree in history, which counteracts Isabel’s desire to write fiction. As an historian, Quintín adopts a hegemonic and didactic perspective that undermines Isabel’s work, deeming it an inferior and pathetic attempt to capture the “ethics” and “truth” of history. According to Quintín,

[La historia] es también un arte que tiene que ver con la verdad. Como registro de los conflictos y de los esfuerzos humanos es inalterable. Un novelista puede escribir mentiras, pero un historiador nunca puede. La literatura no cambia nada, pero la historia ha llegado a alterar el curso del mundo. (332)

It is important to note, as Irene Wirshing does in her essay, “Rosario Ferré’s The
House on the Lagoon: Representations of Dominant and Marginal Discourse,” “neither Quintín nor Isabel can represent the non-represented of their island’s history” (169). Even in the chapters dedicated to subaltern characters such as Petra or Tosca—la adivinadora, these figures are not given any narrative authority and their perspectives are interpreted through the eyes of Isabel and/or Quintín. Even though Petra plays a major role as the backbone of la casa and the black matriarch of Las Minas, that depiction in itself is a stereotype that pigeonholes her within the confines of her racialized role—the often defiant but always loyal servant. The same system of stereotyping is employed in the depiction of Petra’s great-granddaughter, Carmelina. As the product of her mother Alwilda’s rape, Carmelina is destined to be the victim of rape as well. When Quintín confesses to raping her during a family beach day, Petra remains loyal to him rather than to her own kin. Instead of defending her own flesh and blood, Petra subscribes to patriarchal stereotypes, justifying Quintín’s act and hypersexualizing her great-granddaughter: “Además, esto no fue culpa suya. Carmelina tiene al dios del fuego metido entre la piernas” (342).

Once Quintín familiarizes himself with the manuscript and questions the validity of the stories that it documents, he downgrades its content from history to fiction, dismissing Isabel’s work as a creative whim, “una fabricación fantástica” (160) that merely demonstrates her “irresponsabilidad histórica” (163). This attack on Isabel’s literary content and writing style emphasizes a gendered power dynamic that presents Isabel as a naïve, subaltern female lacking expertise and historical professionalism in the shadows of the dominant male historian who represents the cult of patriarchy and the hegemonic knowledge that it stands for. According to Spivak,
The historian, transforming ‘insurgency’ into ‘text for knowledge,’ is only one ‘receiver’ of any collectively intended social act. With no possibility of nostalgia for that lost origin, the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness (or consciousness-effect, as operated by disciplinary training), so that the elaboration of insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not freeze into an ‘object of investigation,’ or worse yet, a model for imitation. (287)

Because Quintín assigns himself the role of the legitimate historian in the novel, Isabel’s role is displaced and the history she is recording takes on the status of gossip. As Dalleo explains in his book, *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere*,

Gossip, as a marginalized public sphere where those excluded from the mainstream can pass along information, emerges as one site where the fissures between the rationalizing objectives of the masculine writer and the chaotic energies of the feminized folk appear most difficult to resolve. (Dalleo 16)

Quintín’s apparent rage toward Isabel’s text not only stems from its unorthodox historiography and gendered inferiority, but also from the fact that he too had hoped to chronicle the history of his family with his wife, who had secretly beat him to it:

[Quintín] recordaba haberle mencionado a Isabel, hacía ya muchos años, la posibilidad de escribir un libro juntos sobre la historia de sus familias, la Mendizábal y la Monfort...Desde joven, Isabel ambicionaba ser escritora, y, siendo él historiador (se había graduado en Columbia University con una maestría en historia), pensó que podrían embarcarse en aquel proyecto juntos. (87)

Because Quintín feels threatened and betrayed by Isabel’s secret literary habits, he exercises epistemic violence, seeking revenge through a silent, textual attack that allows him to invade, violate, and colonize the margins of her text. This silent attack speaks to the unspeakability of the shameful family secrets as well as the unspeakability of the shame that Quintín feels when he realizes that his dirty laundry is airing itself out in what could be the very public sphere of a potentially publishable text. Furthermore, Quintín’s anxiety could be read in conjunction with Dalleo’s argument that “The public sphere is
by no means a neutral space, and is heavily coded by the assumptions about white European bourgeois maleness as a prerequisite for participating and being heard” (Dalleo 7).

Although Isabel is not characterized as a subaltern—she is writing this text, after all—her status is challenged by the epistemic violence that Quintín exerts throughout his metacommentary. The layers of Isabel’s inherited status begin to disintegrate gradually over the course of Quintín’s hostile rebuttal, through which he eventually transforms her into a subaltern outsider or Other that has no right meddling in or belonging to his family. According to Quintín, “Isabel no era una Mendizábal de nacimiento; pertenecía a la burguesía sanjuanera sólo por su matrimonio, y el instinto de la tribu era cerrar filas” (89). It is ironic that Isabel is stripped of her affiliations with nobility and the Mendizábal clan as she submerges herself deeper into their history and her marriage with Quintín. At the same time, however, there is a competing irony stemming from the shifting power dynamic that characterizes the metatextual dialogue between Isabel and Quintín: the system of secrecy that ultimately trumps the microcosmic episteme I referred to earlier. Although Quintín tries to overhaul and silence the knowledge that Isabel shares in the text, his paranoia and narcissism interfere and ultimately expose him as an outsider, excluded from his own family’s secrets, which Isabel now possesses in herstory.10 Isabel is defying silence and subalternity by speaking (writing) the unspeakable and revealing the secrets that threaten and undermine the cult of patriarchy.

Quintín’s paranoia reaches news heights when he accuses Petra of feeding Isabel dirty family secrets for her memoir: “Isabel no sabe cuenta de nada. Era asombroso la

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10 According to Brudzinski, “The use of the lexicon of secrecy in a text can be an indication of semi-paranoid tendency to see knowledge as ‘withheld’ even when there is no evidence of willful concealment of that knowledge” (4).
manera como había caído completamente bajo el hechizo de Petra” (314). Ironically, Quintín’s perception could not be further removed from the truth. When Isabel approaches Petra in an effort to fill the voids of silence and confirm the suspicions of secrets, Petra offers Isabel the facts with the disclaimer, “Hay muchos secretos en esta familia que tú desconoces, Isabel…Yo no tengo derecho a revelártelos” (312). Although Petra is in a position of servitude, her access to the most intimate and interior spaces of the house on the lagoon grants her the privilege to a perspective that even members of the Mendizábal bloodlines are lacking. The penetration of the domestic space facilitates the establishment of an adoptive community for dismembered or subaltern figures who are subtly integrated or forcefully bound to the family whose secrets they guard. Well aware of Petra’s privilege,

Quintín pensó que, al mudarse a vivir de nuevo a la casa de la laguna, debió insistir en que se deshicieron de Petra. Su sombra siempre doble y poderosa se proyectaba demasiado lejos; sus oídos habían recogido demasiados secretos de la familia detrás de las puertas; sus ojos, escrutado demasiados mensajes arrojados irresponsablemente al cesto de la basura. (313)

At this point, it is important to recognize the misplaced resentment that Quintín feels for Petra. Quintín’s character personifies a metaphorical orphan, abandoned by his mother, Rebeca, and banished to the racialized spaces of the basement and kitchen where he was raised by Petra.\(^{11}\) Traumatized by his mother’s rejection and ashamed of his Africanized upbringing, Quintín attempts to revise his own personal history in an effort to alleviate the unspeakable pain of his past. Although Quintín tries to deny his ties to Petra over the course of his metatext, his affiliations with her are confirmed when he admits to having eaten too many crabs—an aphrodisiac and a food source that is racialized throughout the

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\(^{11}\) Rebeca rejects Quintín because he reminds her of the unfulfilled romance that she had with the architect, Pavel: “Quintín había nacido en la casa de Pavel…le recordaba a Rebeca de una época feliz de su vida que prefería olvidar” (Ferré 135).
novel—on the day that he violates Carmelina. Quintín’s affinity for black food is undoubtedly a marker of his suppressed Africanization: “Los cangrejos eran uno de los platos preferidos de Quintín. Les había cogido el de niño, cuando Rebeca lo exilió a los sótanos” (336).  

Quintín’s contact with Isabel’s secret narrative mimics the New World drama in three acts: discovery, conquest, and colonization. Quintín discovers the text accidentally and rather than respecting the privacy of its author, he conquers it by violating the margins with his unsolicited criticism and commentary. Exercising control over the textual body that Isabel bears, Quintín literally inserts himself into the text and imposes an unwelcome presence that colonizes the pages and the psyche of its author. As we observe the development of Quintín’s relationship with the narrative, we grow more aware of the complex that he acquires. Feeling betrayed and exposed, paranoid and hostile, Quintín initially questions his marriage with Isabel and ultimately threatens to kill her if she dares to publish her work. By asking himself if he disrespected Isabel or unintentionally provoked her exposé, Quintín locates himself at the center of her text and speculates that her secret act of writing is a method of revenge. Because the entire premise of Ferre’s novel is predicated on a very complex system of secrecy, it might be useful to remember that “novels can ‘unveil’ without our needing or being able to identify what, precisely, they are unveiling. Rather, if they expose secret information,

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12 As Kyla Wazana Tompkins notes in her book, *Racial Indigestion*, “the cook’s mouth lay at the center of domestic well-being; the food that passed from the hands and the body of the kitchen servant to the dining room figuratively passed through her mouth to the mouths of the master’s or mistress’s family; it was therefore fraught with the possibility of poison, pollution, and race and class contamination” (Tompkins 17).
they do so only by showing it as if it were still unknown—still inside the system of the secret” (Brudzinski 48).

Because this text chronicles a family history, it is populated by orphans, both literal and metaphorical, that crowd the literary/historical landscape, the most notable of those orphans being Isabel, the narrator and author of the metahistory. Raised by her grandmother Abby in the absence of her father who committed suicide and her traumatized mother who was addicted to gambling, Isabel expresses hope of being adopted by Quintín’s family: “Me di cuenta de que ser huérfana era algo a mi favor, porque me ponía en una luz vulnerable…me ponía a la merced de la familia. Ahora yo formaría parte del clan y compartiría todas sus convicciones y prejuicios” (224). That in mind, we might consider Isabel’s documenting this genealogy as a way to insert herself into the family structure that she was missing as a child. By writing her own membership into this family, however, Isabel runs the risk of being dismembered. This risk is realized over the course of the novel, starting with Quintín’s reminding the reader that she is only a Mendizábal by marriage, followed by the subsequent threats of sterilization and death that he poses against her as his metacommentary develops.

The culmination of Isabel’s dismemberment is fully realized when her husband coerces her to have a hysterectomy after his love child—the product of his violating Petra’s great granddaughter, Carmelina—Willie, is born. This brings to light two very significant instances of patriarchal violence and violation that Quintín commits against the female body: forced sterilization and rape. Quintín’s acts of violence mimic the regulatory violence that male figures exercise against women’s bodies throughout the novel. Because men are constantly trying to control the female body by forcing and

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13 This act of rape borderslines incest given the fact that Petra doubles as a mother and a maid for Quintín.
forbidding reproduction, women such as Isabel and Carmelina are transformed into victims of patriarchal violence. Opposing this model, however, is Isabel’s defiant grandmother, Gabriela. Tired of bearing children and fulfilling her husband’s insatiable libido, Gabriela practices abstinence to reclaim her body. As an effective defense mechanism, Gabriela’s abstinence (and separate bedroom) dismantles the patriarchal foundation upon which her family was built. After rearing six consecutive children without a sufficient break in between, Gabriela made all of her daughters secretly swear that they would only have one child every five years and do everything in their power to avoid unwanted pregnancies. According to Gabriela, “Un hijo único es transportable; la madre puede llevarlo cómodamente a todas partes. Pero dos son ya los primeros eslabones de la cadena de hierro con la cual el esposo ata a la esposa al orbe de la tierra” (Ferré 99). In Gabriela’s eyes, children are emblematic of shackles rather than familial love or longevity.

In the case of Isabel’s unwanted hysterectomy, violence is exercised both physically and emotionally, for she is forced to mourn this amputation as the dismemberment from her sex, her future progeny, and her husband, who signs the consent documents for her hysterectomy before she even schedules her gynecological visit.14 According to Isabel,

Lo que más me dolía no era la infidelidad de Quintín, sino lo que me había hecho a mí misma. Cuando unos meses antes Quintín me había expresado que no quería tener más hijos, al principio me dio mucho sentimiento, pero luego me invadió una indignación terrible. Si él no quería tener más hijos conmigo, yo tampoco quería tenerlos con él. (342)

14 In her book, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, Donette Francis “specifically demonst[rates] how Caribbean females experience sexual citizenship, which includes sexual practices such as the freedom to choose to reproduce or not, the liberty of sexual oppression and association, as well as the more conventional articulation of protection from sexual violence. (4)
Isabel’s sterilization emerges as a metaphor for amputation—a metaphor that I revisit in my discussion of Mayra Santos-Febres’ novel, *Nuestra señora de la noche*—because it calls into question the trope of mothering and the Caribbean trend of being dismembered from one’s own genealogy or family history.

As the personified contract of a couple’s union, children legitimize a marriage the same way that a marriage legitimizes children. Although Isabel is sterile, her sterilization provokes a pattern of mothering that ultimately defies the *limpieza de sangre* ideology driving the Mendizábal machine and reinforces the genealogical metaphor of entangled mangrove roots that appears throughout the novel. The discourse of adoption that arises from Isabel’s *othermotherhood* operates in conjunction with the system of secrecy that is fueling the public’s perception of Willie’s mysterious arrival to the Mendizábal family. Because Willie’s conception is a “dark secret”—that is, a secret meant to “hide damaging information” (Brudzinski 4) that could potentially tarnish the family’s reputation as well as its perpetuation of *la gran familia*—the family goes to great lengths to guard it. Rather than telling Willie that he is a product of rape and un/knowingly surrounded by his biological kin in the house on the lagoon, he is led to believe, as is the public, that he was adopted in New York City. ¹⁵ Considered a daring act, “Ninguno de nuestros amigos se

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¹⁵ By admitting that Willie was conceived as a product of interracial rape, the Mendizábal would be forced to sacrifice the mythological model of *la gran familia* and the ideology of *la limpieza de sangre* that they had so fastidiously worked to uphold. Quintín, much like his father Buenaventura before him, succumbs to the temptations of the stereotyped black woman. Following Moreno’s lead, I would suggest that Ferré is employing the stereotype of the hypersexual black female to destabilize the myth of *la gran familia* and the traditional icon of the ethical, benevolent patriarch (65). In dismantling the myth, however, Ferré further perpetuates it by recuperating the image of the benevolent and paternal father figure via Buenaventura’s donating a school to the marginalized community of Lucumi (educating a substantial population of blue-eyed Afro-Puerto Rican children for which he is biologically responsible). This act is ultimately matched by Quintín’s decision to adopt Willie, the product of Quintín’s “affair” with Carmelina. These acts of patriarchal duty are responses to both father figures’ sexual indiscretions and violations, thus illuminating the hypocrisy of the myth itself.
hubiese atrevido a hacer lo que nosotros hicimos: adoptar a un niño mulato y darle nuestro apellido” (345), this faux adoption can be read as an act of white redemption, an act of desperation, or even as an act of desire, considering Isabel’s barren state.

I would argue that Isabel’s desire to have more children stems from the same place as Quintín’s desire not to: a violent trauma from the past. Fearing that his family history will come full circle, Quintín rejects the prospect of fathering a second child and threatens Isabel with abortion: “Si sales encinta de nuevo, tendré que pedirte que te hagas un aborto. No estoy dispuesto a pasar otra vez por la misma angustia que sufri a causa de Ignacio” (322). Traumatized by the memory of his brother’s suicide, Quintín can’t bear the thought of fathering any more children after his first son, Manuel, becomes a political terrorist. Fate works against him, however, and he ends up fathering a second son anyway, the consequence of his violating Carmelina behind the mangroves at Lucumí Beach. In the case of Isabel, her desire to have more children stems from the plural traumas that her mother suffered upon losing her second child and access to her own body. After witnessing her mother, Carmita, hemorrhaging on the bathroom floor after a botched (and unwanted) abortion attempt, Isabel swears that she will never fall victim to the corporeal violence exercised against a women’s right to produce. Carmita’s abortion leaves her sterile and insane, which in turn leaves Isabel abandoned and scarred by the deep wounds of orphanhood: “Mi madre, Carmita Monfort, me causó mi herida secreta, aunque nunca se dio cuenta de ello” (95). History inevitably repeats itself and Isabel too finds herself barren: “Ahora, yo era estéril, por culpa de Quintín. Las mujeres nos quejamos de que la naturaleza discrimina contra nosotras y, sin embargo, cuando perdemos la capacidad reproductora, nos sentimos desvalijadas” (343).
Depressed and despondent in the wake of her hysterectomy, Isabel metaphorically recovers her ability to mother by adopting Willie while simultaneously nurturing the literary body that she bears in his company. Based on the tropes of kinship and dismemberment that are driving this dissertation, I argue that there are two competing metaphors dictating the purpose of Isabel’s narrative. In the case of kinship, I contend that Isabel is recording this family history in an effort to structure a system of kinship that can heal the scars of orphanhood and dismemberment that persist in the wake of her many traumas. Isabel is reproducing a past and bearing a textual body that encompasses the memories, experiences, and geneo-political history of a family and its home(is)land.

As Georgina Dopico-Black explains, “behind every book is a body, and with it, a madness, real or imagined, a genealogy, authentic or forged, a history, remembered or forgotten” (116). As a geneo-political history, Isabel’s text symbolizes an extension of the (imaginary) kinship that connects her to the romanticized spaces and characters of a specific past. While considering the trope of dismemberment, however, another argument could be made. Isabel’s text, which once served as a symbol of membership, ultimately evolves into an allegory for her dismemberment or emancipation from her abusive husband: “[Mi novela] es sobre mi emancipación de ti. Tengo derecho a escribir lo que pienso y tú nunca has podido aceptarlo” (408). What starts as the production of an alternative family archive, eventually transforms into a vengeful and cathartic practice of destroying a family whose history is no longer worthy of preservation:

In the end, Isabel, the novel’s primary narrator, can only escape this oppression by becoming an accomplice in the destruction of the family. Ferré’s narrator essentially breaks with Puerto Rican history as well as with the nation in order to set herself free, a strategy which suggests that like the family, the nation is also doomed unless it can somehow break with patriarchal legacies. (Magnani 159)
With her memoir in hand, her dead husband floating in the lagoon, and her house ablaze, Isabel is finally liberated from the colonial stronghold that her husband had on her. Isabel’s emancipation from Quintín can be read as a coded metaphor for Puerto Rico’s emancipation from imperialism, offering an optimistic independentista message at the end of the novel. At the same time however, the message is conflated by the fact that Isabel flees her home(is)land to seek refuge on the American mainland. Ferré ends the novel with profound irony: her sympathetic independentista narrator ends up exiled in the United States while the steadfast estadista husband floats dead in a Puerto Rican lagoon. In conclusion, Isabel’s Caribbean body is ultimately dismembered from the nation and the nation remains split in two, resulting in a multifaceted limbo.

*Nuestra señora de la noche*

Born in 1966 to a middle class family in Carolina, Puerto Rico, Mayra Santos-Febres started writing at a very young age. By the time she was an undergraduate student at the University of Puerto Rico, her short stories and articles had already been published internationally. Upon completing her master’s degree and doctorate at Cornell University in 1991, Santos-Febres received accolades for her first two collections of poetry, *Anamú y maniqua* and *El orden escapada*, which were followed by her prize-winning short story collection, *Pez de vidrio* in 1994. In 2000, Santos-Febres published her first novel, the award winning, *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, which offers an explicit commentary on race and sexuality in Puerto Rico. Narrating the life of a gay adolescent bolero-singer turned cabaret-star, *Sirena Selena* blurs the fine line of demarcation between gender identities by complicating the politics of seduction, deception, and pleasure. Her third novel, the award winning *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006), furthers Santos-Febres’s
engagement in a third wave feminist discourse and contests the patriarchal depictions of Puerto Rican history that are inscribed in the canon. Santos-Febres’ works, which range in genre from poetry and short stories to novels and critical essays, cover diverse thematic terrain and serve as a vehicle for understanding how the complex relationships between race, sex, and class operate in the Caribbean.

Santos-Febres sets out to accomplish a very different mission than that of her predecessor, Rosario Ferré. Her novel, *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006), fulfills the third wave mission in its appropriation of Puerto Rico’s legendary madam, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer. My third wave reading of Santos-Febres’ novel is informed by Francis’ extensive work on sexual histories in third wave Caribbean women’s writing. Underscoring the “‘unspeakability’ of intimate violence” (“Uncovered Stories” 61), Francis examines the critical connections between the Caribbean female body, sexuality, and citizenship. Using third wave feminism as a point of departure, Francis reads the act of writing fiction as a possible feminist intervention deployed to break the silences and expose the secrets so often repressed by the cult of patriarchy. In her pivotal essay, “Women’s Time,” Kristeva proposes a third wave of feminism and questions the role that literature plays in the women’s desire for affirmation. Upon presenting the question, “Why literature?” Kristeva responds:

> Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth about and otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret, and unconscious universe? Because it thus redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny? (Kristeva 31)

Following this line of questioning, Kristeva considers the women’s identification with the imaginary and contends:
This identification also bears witness to women’s desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, hatreds of the second sex. (32)

Santos-Febres’ novel should be read as a montage of gendered, female perspectives that shed light on bodily tropes that are fundamental in understanding the inescapable violence characterizing the Caribbean experience captured in literature. By sexing the body of a national legend, *Nuestra señora de la noche*, like other third wave works, “centers how sexual power and citizenship are often brutally marked and exercised on Caribbean women’s bodies” (Francis 79).

In its depiction of a mutilated matriarch, *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006) revisits the life of the infamous s/hero, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, better known in Puerto Rico’s national folklore as Isabel la Negra. After leading a tragic and impoverished childhood as an abandoned orphan, Isabel hustles her way into the business of brothels, quickly becoming the island’s most notorious madrina. Migrating between time and space, *Nuestra señora de la noche* replaces the chronology of a linear history with the mosaic re-visioning of an undocumented herstory. The fragmentation of the text provides this mosaic effect; although the pieces of each narrative perspective never overlap in real time, a full-body portrait of the infamous madam is rendered visible by the end. When asked why she structured her novel in such a way, Santos-Febres explains:

Narrar cronológicamente sesenta años de la vida de una persona y de la historia política de una región (Caribe—Puerto Rico) es imposible de sostener en una

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16 I use the word revisit to emphasize the fact that Mayra Santos-Febres is the third Puerto Rican writer to represent the life of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer. Santos-Febres’ novel dialogues with the short stories previously written about “La Negra.” In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the relationship of Santos-Febres’ novel to Otero and Ferré’s short stories.

17 Isabel’s role as a madrina is ironic, but not surprising, considering she abandoned her first and only biological child at birth.
narración lineal. Por eso los saltos. Además, quería explorar los ‘ecos’ de esa misma historia en otras partes—Filipinas, Pennsylvania, Washington, etc. Los procesos de discriminación racial son bien parecidos y caracterizan muchas interacciones sociales durante el siglo XX. (Febres 352)

By jumping between time periods and international borders, Santos-Febres offers a sense of plurality and accessibility to an historical pattern that was replicating itself elsewhere.

Using Puerto Rico’s most notorious madam as a vehicle for reconstructing the sexed female body, Mayra Santos-Febres foregrounds the pervasive and mundane nature of violence through multiple gendered and generational perspectives. In appropriating Isabel’s folkloric legacy, Santos-Febres re-imagines her life through a fragmented genealogy of perspectives stemming from Luis Arsenio Fornaris, Maria de la Candelaria Fresnet, and Isabel herself. The novel’s perspectival plurality uncovers each character’s relationship to violence as its victim or perpetrator. My use of the word violence here encompasses abandonment and neglect, as well as other categories of violence, which range in nature from domestic to systemic. With the exception of the violent shooting that ends Isabel’s life, I argue that the majority of violence committed in this novel falls within Saidiya Hartman’s interpretation of subjection. By “defamiliarizing the familiar,” Hartman moves away from the spectacular scenes of suffering in an effort to elucidate the everyday “diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property” (4). Because of their common occurrence and “unspectacular” nature, the scenes of subjection or instances of violence that I discuss in the following analysis are inherently linked to the infinite silences and the secrets that spark them. By filling her novel with uncomfortable silences, unfulfilled desires, and unspoken feelings, Santos-Febres offers a voice to the muted counternarratives that comprise Isabel La Negra’s herstory. In the words of Santos-Febres,
Estoy rescatando las historia de estas mujeres exitosas que logran finalmente darle por la cabeza al patriarcado, algo que nadie se lo hubiera podido plantear desde la bondad y la obediencia. Mujeres que, con todas sus caídas y metidas de pata y grandes tragedias, logran establecer una voz que no es la usual, no es la acostumbrada. (Carlos 3)

Over the course of the novel, silence is deployed as an instrument of suppression used to mute the self and protect the secret indiscretions of male/paternal figures. Silencing the self emerges as a way for the characters in this novel—specifically Isabel—to regulate their emotions and abate the dangerous repercussions of voicing the violence that they have sustained. In psychology, “self-silencing” is a method of silencing one’s thoughts and feelings in an effort to preserve “outer harmony” (Jack 129). Although it is most typically associated with the illness of depression, I would read Santos-Febres’ use of self-silencing in the novel as a symptom of the patriarchy pandemic that regulates women’s voices, bodies, and citizenship. I evaluate self-silencing as an in/articulation of pain, trauma, or emotional suffering that offers a coping mechanism for the victims of (silenced) violence in the novel. Operating as an alternative to the traditional Western notion of talk therapy (which the novel itself is performing), the act of self-silencing speaks to an inherited patriarchal phenomenon that descends from the historical marriage between silence and violence in the Caribbean.

We see this most clearly in the case of Isabel, whose beauty and stature draw unwanted male attention and inappropriate sexual advances over the course of her youth and adolescence. In spite of the discomfort that she feels under the heavy and suggestive stares of Mariano Moreno and Aurelio Tous, Isabel is advised by Madrina Maruca and Lorenza (respectively), to suppress her fears and silence her feelings. Isabel first engages in the practice of self-silencing when she falls victim to Tío Mariano’s visual violation.
Madrina Maruca’s brother, Mariano devours Isabel with his red, devilish eyes (43), threatening Isabel and activating a metaphorical mute button that renders the vulnerable girl silent:

Esas miradas la ponían intraquila…Madrina Maruca siempre se presenciaba cuando notaba a su hermano mirando a Isabel de aquella manera…Isabel tenía ganas de decirle, ‘a mí no me mires así’, tenía ganas de gritarle, ‘a mí, no me mires, que yo no tengo la culpa.’ (44)

Although Isabel fantasizes about the possibility of reprimanding Mariano and verbally attacking his stares with her words, she deploys a self-silencing instead. It is important to note that Madrina Maruca witnesses this violation, but offers nothing more than a silent interruption. By subtly condemning her brother’s behavior, Madrina is indirectly condoning it. Her only acknowledgement of it surfaces through a conversation that she has with Casiana in which she states: “a esa niña hay que sacarla de aquí, antes que pase una desgracia” (45). Mariano’s indecent behavior solidifies Madrina’s decision to send the young Isabel away for a housekeeping job that will afford her the opportunity to enroll in school and escape Mariano.

The dangerous dynamics of Isabel’s first home are reproduced within the Tous household, proving that the inevitability of violence in the domestic realm is inescapable, regardless of race and class. When the threatening stares of her employer, Don Tous, are eventually translated into a drunken act of sexual violation, Isabel remains mute—helpless and submissive. In the moment of subjection, Isabel deploys the defensive mechanism of self-silencing once again, and her thought process unfolds as follows: “Quizás debería llamar a Lorenza, salir corriendo; pero ¿hacia dónde? ¿Qué otros brazos la podrían acoger? Mejor se quedaba allí, quietecita” (97). Although the act of violation is interrupted by Doña Georgina’s entrance, the paternal perpetrator is not castigated, but
rather ushered out of the situation on account of his drunken confusion. Isabel’s sexual violation is followed by another scene of subjection that further minimizes her victimization and silently condones Tous’ actions. Rather than punishing her husband for raping their adolescent housekeeper, Doña Georgina shames Isabel. By firing Isabel, Doña Georgina contributes to the cycle of silencing, which allows her to participate in the systemic violence that condones and further enables her husband’s violating behavior. This scene of subjection, two-fold in nature, mutilates the domestic space, leaving Isabel homeless and destitute, but free from Don Tous’ sexual harm. Upon leaving the Tous household, Isabel engages in a silent dialogue with her maternal mentor, Lorenza:

Lorenza la impía le regalaba una medalla de la Virgen. Isabel quiso preguntar; acercarse y apoyar su cabeza contra los pechos de Lorenza, quiso abrazarla pero no pudo. Ninguna de las dos pudo…Se tomaron de las manos…y dejaron que sus dedos reposaran los unos sobre los otros por un rato; como cuando Madrina Maruca la había abandonado allí, y Lorenza la agarró de la mano para llevársela adentro de la casa. (99)

Much like Madrina’s breaking the silence and acknowledging danger in the statement that she makes above, Lorenza breaks the silence and acknowledges violation in her last words to Isabel: “Te salvaste por un pelo. Si la señora no hubiera llegado a tiempo, el patrón te hubiera comido como a un pajarito” (99). Through the “domestic mutilation” (Scarry 45) that Isabel experiences at the hand of Don Tous, Santos-Febres strips the paternal figure of his benevolence and rewrites the gran familia as a dangerous, patriarchal machine fueled by silence, secrecy, and scandal. Bookended by silence, Isabel’s experience at the Tous household (which spans over the course of nearly eight years, from childhood to adolescence) comes full circle when she is dismissed for the same reason that she is delivered—to avoid the inevitable risk of sexual violence.
Santos-Febres documents Isabel’s personal evolution through her relationships with men in the years following her violation as a young girl. Isabel’s relationship with Fornarís is complicated by a gendered power dynamic that conflates the boundaries of agency and exploitation. I find the framework that Jenny Sharpe puts forth in her “literary archeology,” *The Ghosts of Slavery*, to be useful in analyzing the scars and profits that Isabel takes away from her secret affair with the seductive lawyer. Sharpe’s project reviews the diverse roles of slave women in an effort to “piece together a range of subjectivities from [their] fragmentary appearance…in the historical records and, in doing so, complicate an equation of their agency with resistance” (xiv). By analyzing the plurality of the domestic realm through the experience of a concubine, Sharpe deploys the competing discourses of agency and exploitation to approach the strategic manipulation of one’s sexuality. Through such manipulation, Sharpe carefully considers the concubine’s ability to turn the gender and racial power dynamic on its head, placing the white male in a position of subjugation (45). Sharpe’s analysis of West Indian concubinage provides a constructive vehicle for approaching the historical implications of the role that Isabel plays in her complicated relationship with Fornarís. In this scenario, Sharpe’s model of concubinage undermines Hartman’s scene of subjection framework applied above. Knowingly manipulating her sexuality, Isabel capitalizes on her own exploitation and reclaims her body in the name of pleasure. In doing so, Isabel countermands the subjection operating in opposition to her sexual agency and reverses the gendered power dynamic that has dictated her scenes of subjection in the past. The third wave underpinnings of Santos-Febres’ text encourage the reader to consider the agency that Isabel exercises in this scenario in contrast to the pain and violation that she
experiences earlier in life. At this pivotal moment in Isabel’s herstory, Santos-Febres demonstrates the possibility for sexual pleasure to coexist alongside or in the wake of pain and violence.

Unlike the sexual violation that Isabel sustains as a young housekeeper in the Tous household, Isabel’s sexual encounters with Fornarís are consensual. After initially declining el licenciado’s invitation to work as a housekeeper in his home, Isabel accepts his lucrative offer and notes an internal transformation that is sparked by her decision: “Isabel empezó a sentir que una segunda piel iba naciendo, quizás más densa que todas sus pieles anteriores” (204). This reference to growing a second skin (one that is notably tougher than the previous ones she wore in the past) resonates with the trope of naming that is embedded in the novel. In Isabel’s case, the trope of naming is inscribed on her body, much like her new skin.18 No longer the young, vulnerable Isabel she once was, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer relates to Fornarís as “una mujer de medios; que trabajaba, tenía un plan…su mujer secreta” (239). Upon acknowledging their mutual attraction, Isabel activates her agency, returning Fornarís’ suggestive stares and engaging in the game that he initiated with his very first employment offer. Almost immediately, Isabel engages in Fornarís’ flirtatious courtship and returns his flattery with nuances of seduction:

supo que estaba a la caza de del joven licenciado. Sonrió ante la revelación. Aún no sabía para qué quería seducirlo. Qué podría sacar de aquel componte. Por el momento, le bastaba con medir su juego, es decir, su habilidad. (233)

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18 Isabel’s transition from mistress to mother is also marked by a name change (moving from Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer to Isabel “La Negra” Luberza) that signals a silencing or abandonment of her previous self. Isabel’s plurality coincides with Jack’s research on self-silencing, which documents the splitting of self or “inner division” (170) that occurs when one is “coping with the status quo by hiding the self, putting authenticity safely behind an accepted façade to keep it alive, protected unjudged” (141).
In my consideration of Isabel’s agency, I would like to emphasize the hunting metaphor that underscores her seduction of Fornarís. Implicit in the act of hunting is the possibility of reaping the benefits of what is caught. By asking herself what she could take away from her potential affair with Fornarís, Isabel is admitting that there is in fact something to gain. Excited by the prospective fantasy of a consensual relationship with *el licenciado*, however, Isabel fails to consider what she could lose in spite of the profit she stands to obtain.

Because of Isabel’s race, illegitimacy, and social station, Fornarís (regardless of his feelings for her) is systemically forbidden to engage in a formal relationship with his housekeeper. The systemic violence forbidding this romance can be traced back to the patriarchal ideologies of *la limpieza de sangre* and *la gran familia*, which speak to the exclusionary practices of a genealogy. Upon abruptly terminating Isabel’s plural roles as his housekeeper and mistress, Fornarís leaves Isabel a symbolic redress that stipulates her ownership of three acres along el río Portugués. According to Isabel, Fornarís “Llegó un buen día, sin más, con unas escrituras bajo el brazo. Yo no sé si fue por que notó la barriga…Dile que no venga más por aquí. Dile que conmigo tienes las cuentas saldas” (240). Seemingly aware of the incriminating and delicate nature of their relationship, Fornarís’ payoff can be read as a living inheritance that provides Isabel access to power and wealth. As a black female property owner, Isabel’s newfound ties to the land replace her ties to the man. Her land ownership precipitates her allegorical citizenship and social...
mobility, transforming the once destitute and homeless Isabel into a property owner: “De allí a cien años, pero de seguro tendría un techo propio algún día, un lugar al cual reclamar. Ya nadie le podría arrebatar aquella opción. Primero la tendrían que matar” (241).  

The repercussions of Isabel’s relationship with Fornarís unfold in a complex narrative construction that juxtaposes past scenes of intimacy against a present scene of (medical) subjection, which leaves Isabel physically and emotionally scarred. A product of her illicit affair with Fornarís, Isabel’s first and only progeny leaves her reproductively dismembered (“un saco vacío, sin madres”) when her ovaries are removed because of her inverted womb (241). Isabel’s inverted womb is symbolic of the contradictions that she embodies and the inverted roles that she plays as a woman (of color) in Puerto Rican society. Her reproductive dismemberment literally amputates her from a potential line of her own while marking her detachment from the child she births and immediately abandons. Like her own mother that was forced to abandon her merely forty days after her birth, Isabel is forced to abandon her newborn baby in order to survive and pursue her dreams of becoming a successful, independent woman. As this history of abandonment repeats itself, the question arises: is the traumatic pattern of orphanhood hereditary? Isabel can only recuperate the amputated branch of her filial tree by serving as the matriarchal madrina or “othermother” (Collins 47) for the abandoned and orphaned girls that inhabit her successful brothel, Elizabeth’s Dancing Place. As both the nurturing madrina and the promiscuous madam, Isabel provides an improvised matrifocal matrix.

Because Isabel has no intentions of abandoning the only property in her name, the narrator foreshadows her death by stating, “first they will have to kill her” (241), which is exactly what they do. The reader is led to believe that “they” refers to the greedy land developers to whom Isabel refuses to give her land. It should be noted that Isabel’s death was documented in Puerto Rican history as a drug related homicide (Aparicio 3). As an innocent bystander and victim of the shootout, Isabel died on January 4, 1974.
for the *adoptive community* that she forges throughout her abbreviated life.\(^{21}\) It is important to note that Isabel’s dismemberment is doubled: on the day that she nearly dies giving birth to Fornaris’ illegitimate son, Fornaris marries Christine Rangle—a daughter of Ponce’s high society, in a legitimate but loveless union that renders Isabel obsolete.

By building Elizabeth’s Dancing Place on el río Potugués, Isabel attempts to lay down roots along the same river that contested those very roots years before. As a site of convergence, el río Portugués is where Isabel’s dismemberment meets her rememberment, where her past poverty is transformed into her present profit, and where her life meets her tragic death. As a young child, Isabel encounters the uncertain and wavering nature of her own orphanhood or dismemberment when she sees her birth mother for the first time, washing clothes on the other side of the river: “El día que Isabel vio a su madre, Madrina Maruca la llamó tomándola fíjamente por los hombros…La volteó hasta que Isabel quedó de frente a la otra orilla del río y le dijo, apuntándole con el dedo, ‘esa es tu madre’” (37). Observing her mother’s black skin, white teeth, and striking yellow eyes from a distance, the young Isabel is confronted by the reality of abandonment that sealed her fate only forty days after her birth. Abandonment is thus personified by her biological mother who stands at a distance with no knowledge of Isabel’s presence on the other side of the riverbank. For that reason, I read the river as a barrier that simultaneously problematizes the primal scenes of separation and union, dismemberment and rememberment between a mother and her daughter.

Isabel’s history of abandonment is rewritten as a foundational myth of origins that is engendered in her plural identities and powerful legacy. As the story goes, Isabel was

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\(^{21}\) I revisit the concept of the *adoptive community* in greater detail in Chapter 3.
born on the day of the most violent storm that Puerto Rico had known to date. Flooding el río Portugués and destroying the harvest and homes in its path, the storm was a force to be reckoned with, much like Isabel herself: “Tú naciste el mismísimo día de la tormenta. Por eso, negrita, es que a ti hay que tenerte respeto. Cuando naciste, se desbordó el Portugués. Tumbó cosechas y casas...” (39). Isabel was delivered to Teté Casiana by the desperate migrant worker, María Oppenheimer forty days later: “Por ese camino que tú ves ahí, apareció tu mamá con un bultito de carne entre las manos. Eras tú, mija, y ella te traía para acá, justo después de la cuarentena, porque tenía que volver a trabajar y no había familiar que te cuidara” (40). Isabel knows her origin story and all of its variations by memory (39) and these variations pertain to the varying identities that Isabel harbors over the course of her life. By building Isabel’s life around the competing functions of the river—it dismembers her from her mother, but remembers her to the adoptive community that she forges within the space of her brothel—Santos-Febres seems to be writing back to the foundational role that rivers play in her own works and the works of Puerto Rico’s literary community. In the section that follows, I offer a brief analysis of the roles that rivers play in Santos-Febres’ short story, “Resinas para Aurelia” and Julia de Burgos’ poem, “Río Grande de Loíza.”

Set in the Puerto Rican slum of Patagonia, “Resinas para Aurelia” narrates the tragic story of the queer adolescent protagonist, Lucas and his grandmother Nana Poubart, who has migrated to Puerto Rico from the neighboring island of Nevis. By omitting details of Nana’s mysterious migration but making deliberate mention of her

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22 Some critics have identified this storm as the San Ciriaco hurricane, which struck Puerto Rico in 1899. This speculation, however, does not coincide with Isabel’s historically documented date of birth, July 23, 1901. If Santos-Febres is in fact referring to this historical hurricane, then this historical discrepancy emphasizes the instability of Isabel’s (myth of) origins.
movement, Santos Febres introduces a dialogue about the aquatic motion of Caribbean bodies. In spite of Patagonia’s contamination, fatal flooding, and sexual violence, Nana raises Lucas in what appears to be a divine sanctuary, the home of her aromatic garden. Bearing the floral ingredients with which Nana concocts her restorative resins, this garden heals the broken bodies and the broken souls that adorn the slum. Ironically, the growth of Nana’s garden is dependent on Lucas’ collecting human excrement from the neighboring whorehouse. While human feces prove to be a source of purity in this story, giving life to the plants in Nana’s garden, water proves to be a source of danger, delivering death and wreaking havoc when the river floods. Transporting hundreds of drowned and mutilated bodies through the town, the flooded river robs Nana of her life and Lucas of his kin, forcing him to wade through the blurred boundaries of life and death, purity and contamination, perversion and innocence.

Unlike the prose mentioned above, Julia de Burgos’ poem “Río Grande de Loiza” appropriates the river as a source of life rather than as an explicit site of death:

¡Río Grande de Loíza!.. Mi manantial, mi río,
desde que alzóse al mundo el pétalo materno;
contigo se bajaron desde las rudas cuestas
a buscar nuevos surcos, mis páldidos anhelos;
y mi niñez fue toda un poema en el río,
y un río en el poema de mis primeros sueños.

In this poem, Burgos uses the river as a metaphor for describing the e/motional and multivalent nature of her own life stages, which are appropriately reflected in the ever-changing waters of Puerto Rico’s Río Grande de Loiza. Ironically, the metaphor of the river ushers Burgos through each stage of her life while simultaneously anchoring her in the soil of her native Puerto Rico. This trope allows Burgos to locate her origins in the multiple forms that water takes, while speaking to the plurality that characterizes Puerto Rico's landscape.
Rico and the Caribbean collective. Like one’s own shifting identity or plural experiences, the river adapts to various forms throughout the poem. Burgos configures the river as a lost child, a maternal wellspring, a sensuous lover, a source of pride and pain.

I find the river to be an appropriate allegory for approaching Isabel’s shifting identities and inverted roles because its consistent inconsistency is highly reminiscent of the Caribbean’s “indeterminacy and metamorphosis” (Dash *The Other America* 9). The river, although aquatic in form, is still grounded on land. While it may conform to the colonization of a space, the river itself cannot be colonized. Its powerful ability to divide and conquer physical space is unlike any other border of its kind.

Like el río Portugués, Elizabeth’s Dancing Place becomes a site of convergence. Joining feminity and masculinity, the brothel is where the matrifocal meets the patriarchal and Isabel meets Luis Arsenio, the legitimate son of her former lover, Fernando Fornarís. In spite of her attempts to avoid the scars Fornarís left her, Isabel remains surrounded by the living legacies of her silenced, secret relationship with el licenciado: his son and her brothel. Little does Isabel know, however, she and Luis Arsenio are victims of the same man’s abandonment. For Isabel and Luis Arsenio, the brothel becomes a revised home space that breaks the traumatic silences of their mutilated domestic environments. Upon entering Elizabeth’s for the first time, Luis Arsenio is fascinated by the gendered role reversal that dominates the dynamic. Mesmerized by the “chicas, las pupilas/ahijadas/protegidas de Isabel,” Luis Arsenio comments on the way they are able to command the space that they occupy: “Las mujeres eran las responsables de romper la tirantez de los machos. No había tensión, no había
vigilia, no había silencio.” (23) Luis Arsenio appears overwhelmed, if not startled by the stimulating environment and carnivalesque nature of the brothel:

Era otra dimensión, distinta y alegre, parecida a los carnavales donde las parejas de enamorados caminan de manos hasta la carpas de juegos y los señores tertulian recostados de las vitrinas. Pero no. Era otra la alegría del Elizabeth’s. Una alegría derramada pero consciente de su existencia casi imposible. (23)

Luis’ observations detail the uncanny happiness of this unknown terrain—a terrain that swiftly ushers him into his first sexual encounter and the construction of his own masculinity. As Radost Rangelova explains,

the image of masculinity constructed through the space of the brothel is traditional, patriarchal, in terms of power, as well as in its racial and class characteristics. Even though Isabel is at the center of the brothel’s existence and success, the women that work for her occupy a subordinate position used only to serve the needs of the male clients. (Rangelova 301)

Although Elizabeth’s Dancing Place offers a matrifocal matrix, it is important to recognize that it is funded by patriarchal transgressions. Like any domestic realm, the brothel is built upon a foundation of secrets that are trafficked and traded for privilege and power.

By exposing the pervasiveness of patriarchy, Santos-Febres reveals the various ways in which violence saturates the vulnerable bodies and permeable psyches of the characters in her novel. I am particularly intrigued by the way that Santos-Febres breaks down the race and gender binaries by refocusing her attention on both white and black males’ vulnerability to violence. In spite of the fact that Luis Arsenio is white and Roberto is black, both of Fornarís’ (il)legitimate sons are destined for abandonment and therefore susceptible to the same species of violence regardless of their race. By depicting both of them as victims of violence, Santos-Febres riffs on the Caribbean trope of twinning by doubling more than their inherited Fornaris features. As brothers, they are
victims of a “silencio paralelo” that leaves them both orphaned and erased in the distant gaze of their shared father: “Al fin escuchar el nombre de la mujer que por tanto tiempo lo dejó huérfano a él también, medio borrado en la mirada distante de su padre, en los asedios histéricos de la madre que omitía” (317).

Both Fernarís sons, in spite of their opposite upbringings, are raised by women who have lost their minds. I would argue that the presence of deranged women in Santos-Febres’ novel, as well as in Ferré’s *La casa* (consider Isabel’s mother, Carmita Monfort) symbolizes the emotional scars of enduring patriarchal trauma. Just as Isabel La Negra is constantly in touch with the physical scar that cuts across her abdomen, Christine Rangle and La Vieja are mentally scarred by the silences that they perpetuate and the patriarchal secrets that they guard. From La Vieja’s stream of consciousness, the reader learns that silence is actually the manifestation of damaging patriarchal secrets:

> el silencio es negro, el silencio es esa cosa que dibuja una palabra que ella no puede saber. No sabes nada, vieja tonta, no sabes que el susurro del pensamiento deja esa mancha, esa mácula tan negra como una piel, tan levantada como una cicatriz. (285)

Both Christine and La Vieja are forced to protect the Fernarís sons from knowing about their father’s transgressions, a responsibility that is tied to silencing the existence of the other brother. While Christine drinks herself into oblivion and eventually death, La Vieja loses her mind to religious fetishism. Signifying on the Caribbean trope of the madwoman, Santos-Febres identifies patriarchy as a culprit for madness and critiques what Silvio Torres-Saillant calls “the social suffocation caused by gender subjugation” (73) that leads to lunacy in Caribbean literature. By juxtaposing Christine’s silence against La Vieja’s unintelligible rambling, Santos-Febres incorporates these marginalized
and suppressed female figures into Puerto Rico’s unofficial memory: one as a voice of white privilege, the other as abject.

After sustaining years of silence in the shadows of his physically absent father and emotionally absent mother, Luis Arsenio moves abroad to Philadelphia where he is met with a new breed of violence. Stemming from his wavering island identity and unrequited love for the eligible American, Maggie Carlisle, abandonment haunts Luis Arsenio in an unfamiliar context. As an upper class, white Puerto Rican, Luis Arsenio had not previously experienced life through the lens of the Other. Upon arriving at the University of Pennsylvania to embark on his undergraduate studies, however, Luis Arsenio is met with a violent eurocentricity that lands him in limbo. Straddling his first and third world identities, much like his native Puerto Rico, Luis Arsenio succumbs to an imperial shaming that transforms him from Luis Arsenio Fornarís into Louie Forneress.

As an illegible foreigner hailing from a lost island in the tropics, Luis Arsenio accepts the butchering of his name as his own perceived membership into American society. In spite of his hopeless attempts to correct the American pronunciation of his Puerto Rican name, Luis Arsenio surrenders to assimilation and recreates a myth of origins for himself that erases his Puerto Rican roots and reaffirms his Caribbean inferiority complex: “’Nosotros somos corsos’, apuntó Luis. No mencionaría las islas. No hacía falta” (147). This self-loathing complex is further developed while Luis Arsenio is dining at his Jewish roommate’s home on Rosh Ha Shana. Intimidated by the Old World identities surrounding him at the dinner table, Luis Arsenio reflects on the grand historical stature of European cities: “Aquella sobremesa era punto de encuentro de miles de viajes y miles de mundos viejos. Viena, Lisboa, Ámsterdam, los puntos geográficos se
sucedian en las conversaciones, convirtiéndose en referencias de paso” (147). Luis Arsenio’s European envy does not take into consideration the fact that these stately cities have since exiled the Jewish people with whom he is dining. It does, however, emphasize his susceptibility and subscription to epistemic violence. Luis Arsenio’s Caribbean shame and island anxiety resonate with the self-as-other predicament that Franz Fanon theorizes with regard to epistemic violence in the foundational text, *Black Skin, White Masks*. As far as Luis Arsenio is concerned, the Caribbean is just an invisible, history-less archipelago, dismembered from the “civilized” Western world. Luis Arsenio’s shame has deeper roots that trace back to the home and resonate with his mother’s alcoholism:

La vio beber sin tregua hasta bajarse media botella. Sintió el olor rancio de los perfumes de su madre mezclándose con el fermento de aquel licor. La vio cabecear hasta dejarse caer sobre la mesa. Vio a su madre borracha del todo, olvidada de sí, tirada sobre las mesas como un guiñapo y sintió vergüenza, (112)

Luis Arsenio’s dreams of becoming a lawyer and marrying Maggie are crushed when he finds his scholarship compromised and his girlfriend in the arms of an American man. Devastated by the fact that he and Maggie don’t share the same vision of the future, Luis Arsenio falls victim to abandonment once again. This time, however, the violence of his abandonment is rooted in a profoundly racist discourse of the Other. Humiliating his masculinity, racial affiliations, and social status, Maggie asks,

¿cómo iba yo a presentarte a mi familia? Hola, este es Louie Forneress from some island. No conozco a sus padres. No sé si tiene medios para sostenerme. Nos queremos casar y vivir en la selva, en un árbol junto a los monos. No es tan alto como Johnny Westmuller, pero…Me Jane, yo Tarzán.” (228)
While this discourse speaks to the perpetuation of ignorance in the United States, it also exposes the epistemic violence that lives at the root of the historic relationship between the colonizer (United States) and the colonized (Puerto Rico).

Like that of his brother, Roberto’s experience with violence is taken to new heights when he leaves Puerto Rico. While stationed in the Philippines during the first leg of his WWII tour, Roberto is tested by the violent racism of the native civilians. After allegedly assassinating a Philippine in his own self-defense, Roberto is brought before a court where Luis Arsenio finally confirms the existence of his long lost, illegitimate brother. Roberto undergoes a name change and a shift in identity when he is publicly recognized as Private Roberto F. Fornaris in the United States Army—a name that has been silenced for most of his life and conflated with the identity of Rafael, which was given to him by La Vieja, Madrina Monserrat. While their fortuitous meeting in the army speaks to the possible joining of a metaphorical and literal brotherhood, it also accentuates the fact that the dominating silences of Puerto Rico strictly prohibited the opportunity to meet on their native island. Their reunion, albeit long over due, plays a pivotal role in Santos-Febres’ commentary on the myth of *la gran familia*.

By relocating the Fornaris sons to the mainland, Santos-Febres offers a critique of the problematic relationship between Puerto Rico and the de/legitimizing force of the United States. Whether they are on the university campus or in basic training camp, Luis and Roberto are equally disdained in American society and exploited in the Armed Forces. As emasculated victims of imperial and epistemic violence, the Fornaris brothers are forced into a pattern of self-loathing that precludes them from taking their island-nation in a positive direction upon returning home. Although the United States serves as a
site of union, the union is born out of a scene of subjection, which further contributes to the dynamic of family implosion undermining the archetype of la gran familia. By reimagining the Puerto Rican family through the symbol of the la Virgen negra, niño blanco, Santos-Febres demonstrates the rampant trend of women mothering other women’s children in the absence of fathers.

Because Luis Arsenio and Roberto symbolize the only successful union that is forged in this novel, the heteropatriarchal romantic model is rendered obsolete and the image of la gran familia is left disfigured and abandoned. In her third wave-feminist revision, Mayra Santos-Febres continues to problematize the relationship between the female body, sexuality, and citizenship. Although Isabel’s death symbolizes her body’s dismemberment from the nation, her legacy is remembered in the national imaginary, due in large part to the joining of herstory and history that Santos-Febres offers in her novel.

Conclusion

For every secret that is buried in La casa de la laguna, there is a silence that scars in Nuestra señora de la noche. La casa de la laguna manipulates the written word in an effort to maintain the unspeakability or silencing of secrets, while still offering a cathartic and revealing element to the secret itself. In addition to the tangled bloodlines, unknown births and curious deaths, mysterious incomes, and shifting political partisanship, the central secret of the novel is the novel itself—Isabel’s herstorical narrative and the silent, textual dialogue that emerges in its margins. In the same vein, Nuestra señora de la noche explores the undeniable linkage between silence and violence. Using sexed female

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23 Coincidentally, Rosario Ferré demonstrates Puerto Rico’s inability to operate outside of a North American sphere of influence as well. In the case of La casa, the United States serves as a degenerating force that compromises the status of Puerto Rico’s independence while simultaneously legitimizing the bond between Isabel and her illegitimate mulatto son, Willie.
bodies as a point of departure, Santos-Febres contests the limits of patriarchy and dismantles the myth of *la gran familia* by revising the roles that women play in Puerto Rico’s national narrative.

In both novels, the only successful unions are those forged with illegitimate mulatto sons in the United States: Isabel and Willie seek asylum in Florida, while Luis Arsenio and Roberto forge a bond as the last two living Fornaris in Puerto Rico. Coincidentally, however, both Isabel’s are dismembered from the nation: Isabel Monfort is exiled to the United States and Isabel “La Negra” Luberza is shot and killed. Although Ferré and Santos-Febres break down the barriers of patriarchy in their respective novels, the conclusions that they offer beg the question, is there a place for a woman’s body in the nation? By leaving the patriarchal family model in ruins, Ferré and Santos-Febres propose matrifocal structures that serve as recourse through which female bodies are rehabilitated as mother figures and reintegrated into the notion of Puerto Rican belonging. I would suggest that the destruction of patriarchal ideals hints at the possibility of creating a feminist counter-myth in which *la gran familia puertorriqueña* is redefined as a matrifocal construction that grows out of familial rupture, violence, and dismemberment, much like the *adoptive community* that I put forth in the following chapters.
bell hooks argues that the anatomical iconography of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work creates a text of absence and loss in which the mutilated black male body remains eternally unfulfilled (31). Arguing against the possibility of locating corporeal wholeness in Basquiat’s body of work, hooks explains that Basquiat was “engaged in an extended
artistic elaboration of a politics of dehumanization. In his work, colonization of the black body and mind is marked by the anguish of abandonment, estrangement, dismemberment, and death” (30). Rather than reading Basquiat’s art as an articulation of dehumanization, I interpret *Self-Portrait as a Heel, Part Two* (1982) as a depiction of rehumanization because it translates the tropes of dismemberment and fragmentation into expressions of corporeal wholeness.

Consistent with neo-expressionism and his signature primitivist aesthetic, *Self-Portrait as a Heel, Part Two* accommodates a constellation of symbols that stem from Basquiat’s color palette, imagery, and embedded personal history. Basquiat’s self-portrait adapts the color palette of the Pan-African movement (green, black, and red), which called for a collective diasporic solidarity. In an effort to reconcile the divisions that were created by the violent historical processes of dismemberment separating Africans from Africa, Pan-Africanism set out to achieve diasporic unity and construct a composite identity. By signifying on Pan-Africanism, Basquiat unravels a legacy of limb/o that juxtaposes the tropes of separation and cohesion that abound in his work. With the painting’s bright green background, Basquiat also evokes the syncretic spirit of the *santería orisha*, Ogún. Associated with the colors green and black for Saint Peter, Ogún is often depicted as a warrior carrying a machete. A divine blacksmith, Ogún is reknowned for crafting tools and weapons “that when put to use by some occupational groups, increase productivity, but that also, when put to use by others, destroy the innocent” (Barnes 17). Ogún’s characterization is critical to Basquiat’s self-portrait because it reinforces the violent narrative of dismemberment while highlighting Basquiat’s experience as a syncretic body in diasporic limbo.

C24 Coincidentally, Basquiat’s memorial service was held in Saint Peter’s Church (Hoban 4).
Born on December 22, 1960 in Brooklyn, New York to an Afro-Puerto Rican mother and a Haitian father, Jean-Michel Basquiat emerged on the neo-expressionist art scene after establishing himself as the graffiti artist, SAMO during the late 1970s (Fretz 2). At the age of eight, Basquiat was hit by a car and sustained a broken arm as well as severe internal injuries that led to the removal of his ruptured spleen (Fretz 6). Exposing him to corporeal vulnerability at a young age, Basquiat’s accident and subsequent stay in the hospital activated a fascination with the human body that was inscribed in his artwork. While recovering in the hospital, Basquiat entertained himself with the medical text, *Grey’s Anatomy* (Fretz 6). A gift from his mother, this book informed Basquiat’s interpretation of the human body and undoubtedly inspired the bodily tropes that characterize his aesthetic. Following his recovery, Basquiat’s parents divorced and his mother was committed to a mental institution two years later (Fretz 7). In an effort to process this maternal abandonment and familial fracture, Basquiat dismembered himself from his broken bloodlines at the age of eighteen and decided to explore his artistic passion as a homeless graffiti artist turned professional artist in New York City. Basquiat’s transition from subculture to high culture signaled a profound shift in his consciousness and identity.

According to Nicholas Mirzoeff,

In the seven years in which he was a professional artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat tried to forge an artistic identity for himself. It was a tripartite process, involving a consideration of what it meant to be in America but not of America; what it meant to be of Haitian and Puerto Rican extraction while white... Basquiat tried to imagine a body that was not marked by race, while being constantly reminded of the operations of the racial mark inscribed on his own body by others. (169)
The experiences that Mirzoeff outlines above speak to the sentiment of limb/o that Basquiat conveys in *Self-Portrait as a Heel, Part Two*. With two amputated hands flanking the top left and bottom right corners of the portrait and a detached head that seems to be floating toward the edge of the canvas, Basquiat’s mutilated, disjointed body exists in tension with the abstract black silhouette that stabilizes the viewer’s gaze at the center of the painting. The back view of the black silhouette appears to be holding a paint brush against a white patch of paint or fresh canvas, while Basquiat’s disconnected head presides over the portrait and the meta-portrait, two parts of the same whole. As an anchoring image of wholeness, the black silhouette embodies two textual fragments that read “BACK VIEW” and “COMPOSITE.” Although Basquiat is notorious for incorporating text and cryptic messages into his work, this limited but deliberate use of language offers a particularly compelling commentary on the competing tropes of dismemberment and corporeal wholeness. With two arrows stemming from a roughly sketched box, the message “BACK VIEW” guides the viewer’s gaze and directs perspective, while signifying on the tradition of Leonardo da Vinci’s anatomical drawings (Mirzoeff 169). This playful jab at da Vinci’s work also shines through the portrait’s title *Self-Portrait as a Heel, Part Two*, which is clearly a misnomer for a painting that makes no reference to the body’s lower extremities.

In addition to signifying on the technical nature of anatomical drawings, the text “BACK VIEW” remits us to the West African philosophy of *sankofa*, which is best translated as “go back and take” in Ghana’s Akan language. Most often depicted as a bird moving into the future with its head turned to the past, *sankofa* is a symbol of hindsight that Basquait seems to be appropriating in this portrait. Because the black silhouette at
the center of the painting can also be interpreted as a trunk-like midsection or torso, the words “BACK VIEW” underscore the haunting image of Basquiat’s decapitated head, which is actively defying the text block’s direction as well as the torso’s positioning. In the spirit of sankofa, Basquiat proves that a whole body is not born, but rather constructed in the rubble of bodily fragments and missing pieces of the past.

Directly below the label “BACK VIEW” is an additional boxed fragment of text that reads “COMPOSITE.” This textual fragment articulates a sense of optimism by demonstrating how the random limbs of Basquiat’s fractured corpus are in fact smaller parts of a larger whole. Basquiat’s word choice unpacks a narrative of bodily void that simultaneously re/produces a narrative of corporeal wholeness. Single-handedly breaking the silence of the unspeakable, “COMPOSITE” illuminates the violent history that is painfully inscribed on Basquiat’s body while acknowledging the split subjectivity that informs the wholeness of the portrait and its artist. By deconstructing his own black body, Basquiat is able to reconstruct himself as a full-bodied composite of fragments. I have chosen to open this chapter with Basquiat’s self-portrait in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of corporeal dismemberment and fragmentation in the Caribbean’s collective and diasporic imaginaries. Like the Caribbean authors that I discuss in this chapter, Basquiat is fleshing out an entire body of history that is inscribed on his body as well as on the greater Caribbean bodyscape.

This chapter intends to uncover the ways in which the vulnerabilities of the volatile human body are used to allegorize orphanhood and the fraught nature of a family unit in the Caribbean. While the previous chapter looked at revisionist histories through a gendered, feminist perspective (herstories), this chapter analyzes revisionist histories
through a lens of otherness that refocuses the reader’s attention on corporeal differences that are indelibly imprinted on to racialized bodies via dismemberment and disfigurement. As Guillerminda De Ferrari so aptly points out in her book, *Vulnerable States*, the theoretical genealogy of the Caribbean has been built largely on bodily archetypes and racially driven models that offer linguistic and rhetorical tools for discussing the region’s miscegenated composition. In De Ferrari’s words,

> The intricate relation between body, identity, and history in Caribbean societies is one of the reasons why, for several decades, theory has sought to conceptualize the archipelago’s social and cultural uniqueness almost exclusively from the perspective of race. (De Ferrari 11)

I am particularly drawn to this “intricate relation” because of the way that it writes back to the Caribbean episteme, which has historically mapped itself out almost exclusively in terms of the body via race.

In this chapter, I traverse the Caribbean’s literary landscape in search of a link between bodily tropes and the disfigured Caribbean family. I establish a metaphorical connection between the body with missing limbs and the family tree with missing limbs in order to map out the space of limbo in which both allegorical and literal orphans are depicted. In doing so, I analyze Alejo Carpentier’s novel, *El reino de este mundo* (1949) along with Gabriel García Márquez’ *Del amor y otros demonios* (1994) and Mayra Montero’s *Son de Almendra* (2005) in order to illuminate the persistence of a pattern that is repeated and revised across the far reaching boundaries of each author’s race, gender, generation, and place of origin. I have found that all three novels under discussion in this chapter, regardless of their authorial differences and the significant historical moments that they depict, draw attention to the histories that are imprinted on to Othered bodies.
These indelible personal histories inevitably manifest as allegories for the painful genealogical histories that are reproduced in each novel.

In the case of *El reino de este mundo*, for example, the familial body’s existence is abolished from the beginning. Because Carpentier is exposing the destruction of kinship through the horrors of slavery, the model of the nuclear family is deprived to slaves and therefore made irrelevant. I use familial rhetoric throughout my discussion in order to defy the inhumane and unnatural patterns of genealogical destruction that are portrayed throughout the text. While *El reino* depicts the complete and utter denial of family by slavery and revolution, *Del amor y otros demonios* demonstrates the possibility and immediate ruination of a heteronuclear family in the context of colonial Cartagena de Indias. García Márquez levels familial vulnerability and corporeal vulnerability, exposing his protagonist’s victimization in the face of racial panic, patriarchal violence, and the surveillance of the Inquisition. In *Son de Almendra*, Montero also hints at the possibility of a nuclear family, but ultimately reveals its violent mutilation in pre-revolutionary Havana. Unlike the male authors with whom she is dialoguing, Montero avoids a discourse of invisibility by making hypervisible the disfiguring repercussions of corporeal and familial decay.

At the very foundation of these familial failures lies an overwhelming violence that converts the human body into a battlefield. In all three novels, however, bodies transformed into sites of violence ultimately emerge as bodies of resistance. I argue that these authors use the disfigured body as a sign or vehicle for approaching the dismembered family and its fraught nature in the Caribbean. Physical amputation becomes a marker of familial dismemberment that detaches the character from his/her
genealogy, but re-members them to a history, a legacy, or a memory. Defying their own dismemberment, these characters reclaim their corporeality and “attempt to reconstruct and revalidate [the human body] as a site of memory” (De Ferrari 3).

**El reino de este mundo**

Written by Alejo Carpentier after his visit to Haiti in 1943, *El reino de este mundo* (1949) presents the groundbreaking history of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), revised and retold through the ever-omitted black perspective.\(^{25}\) Carpentier writes against the grain of dominant white history in order to resurrect the black perspective and lend a literary voice to those who were silenced. As a critical revision of hegemonic history, *El reino de este mundo* plays a fundamental role in the creation of the collective Caribbean identity and imagination by challenging and deconstructing the dominant episteme. The revolution presented in *El reino de este mundo* proves to be a thorough compilation of the literary, historical, and ethnographical inspirations driving Carpentier’s monumental excavation (Birkenmaier 19). Upon visiting Haiti in 1943, Carpentier found himself enchanted by the historical remnants that embellished the Caribbean’s most marvelous battlefield. While engaging in rigorous ethnographic research and extensive historical documentation there, Carpentier discovered the marvelous in the mundane—“lo real-maravilloso”—and ultimately realized that Haiti, like the rest of the Americas, could be defined by a profound sense of contradiction (Carpentier 4). As a género mulato, “lo real-maravilloso” locates Haiti’s revolutionary agency in a collective faith that miraculously manipulates the colonial reality:

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\(^{25}\) Born in Switzerland on Dec. 26, 1904, Alejo Carpentier grew up in Havana, Cuba. In spite of his European ancestry and the years he spent in exile, Carpentier self-identified as Cuban. Dedicating much of his life and work to *Afro-Cubanismo* and his theory of *lo real maravilloso*, Carpentier’s work was a major precursor to the Latin American Boom.
Lo maravilloso comienza a serlo de manera inequívoca cuando surge de una inesperada alteración de la realidad (el milagro), de una revelación privilegiada de la realidad, de una iluminación inhabitual o singularmente favorecedora de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad, de una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad, percibidas con particular intensidad en virtud de una exaltación del espíritu que lo conduce a un modo de ‘estado límite’. Para empezar, la sensación de lo maravilloso presupone una fe. (Carpentier 3)

Therefore, Carpentier engineers “lo real-maravilloso” as a vehicle for constructing a collective faith that ultimately endangers the individualism promoted by Western ideology (Birkenmaier 25). By developing this sense of black collectivity in his novel, Carpentier illuminates the imagined community that is born out of a kinless, anti-family model perpetuated by the system of slavery.

Although it is Mackandal’s legacy that infiltrates each page of the novel and every generation of Haiti’s offspring, Carpentier’s historical fiction is revised through the eyes of Ti Noel. Even though Ti Noel is invisible to the white hegemony, he is not omniscient. He is not the narrator, but he is a protagonist, a witness, and an actor. Ti Noel plays a role in the revolution, but he is not the hero in terms of epic heroism. Most importantly, Ti Noel retains his agency as Carpentier’s “privileged witness to Haitian history” (Paravisini-Gebert 120) even though he is infantilized by the white masters and lacks the privilege of power that is rooted in a voice. The obscurity surrounding the characterization of Ti Noel is emphasized by the fact that he does not have a surname, and simply goes by the nickname Ti Noel (Kreyol for Petit Noel). According to Hortense Spiller’s pivotal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” a slave’s absent surname demonstrates the “destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistic, and ritual connections,” which in turn makes him/her an orphan (Spillers 73). Ti Noel’s absent surname and Kreyol nickname indicate that he exists outside of a
kinship system and within a state of orphanhood. Carpentier emphasizes Ti Noel’s orphanhood in order to set up the narrative trajectory of the novel, which reestablishes kinship with Africa instead of Europe.

Spillers speaks to this repeated motif of orphanhood and argues that the institution of slavery, or captivity, dispossesses a child of his/her mother and reassigns that child to a master, who replaces patrimonial ties with possession/ownership (74). Spillers refers to the master’s possession of a child born into slavery as an “enforced state of breach…where ‘kinship’ loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations” of the slave-master system (74). Efforts to Christianize this concept of possession were recorded in Duque de Estrada’s eighteenth century manual *Doctrina Para Negros*. In this manual, Duque de Estrada creates a Christian genealogy that provides the orphaned slave with a father and a God who maintain interchangeable roles as the master in that slave’s life. This Christian belief system contributed to the slave’s destructive ancestral dispossession and violent disconnection from the Motherland: “Ya Guinea se acabó, ya ustedes nunca volverán allá, ya son Christianos, ya son hijos de Dios, ya saben los mandamientos de la Ley de Dios, ya saben q los q guardan esos mandamientos van al cielo; y los q no los guardan van al infierno. (Duque de Estrada 119)

Bearing Estrada’s Christian gospel in mind, Ti Noel’s status as an invisible, illegitimate orphan is complicated by the fact that he represents visible, valuable property for his master, Lenormand de Mezy.

Regardless of the fact that Ti Noel has been born into slavery, and therefore genealogical dismemberment, he still attempts to establish an imaginary kinship by living vicariously through Mackandal’s epic myths of Africa. Mackandal’s African legends play
into the orphaned imagination, allowing Ti Noel to construct a visible image of a lineage that was destroyed and displaced by the capitalist confines of slave ownership. Ti Noel’s attraction to Mackandal and the stories that he tells merely demonstrates the orphan’s gripping desire to reconnect the frayed ties that his imagination maintains with Africa. It is important to recognize Mackandal as the African patriarch, he who gives voice to that which was silenced in the diasporic memory:

sus artes de narrador, caracterizando los personajes con muecas terribles, imponían el silencio a los hombres, sobre todo cuando evocaba el viaje que hiciera, años atrás, como cautivo, antes de ser vendido a los negreros de Sierra Leona. (17)

As the personification of Ti Noel’s connectedness with Africa, Mackandal symbolizes the ability to spread the richness and royalty of African ancestry across generational boundaries. While Loichot relates kinship ties to the transmission of stories—oral narratives—that rescue and reconstruct the dismembered family (2), I would suggest that Mackandal’s stories, as oral and eventually written legacies, symbolize a generational inheritance for a people that have been dismembered from their own genealogical structures. Ti Noel seizes the opportunity to spread Mackandal’s legacy through oral transmission, passing on the *mandainga*’s stories to his children and teaching them the simple songs that he has composed in his honor (Carpentier 48).

Although they are described as simple, Ti Noel’s song composing habits should not be overlooked. In fact, Ti Noel’s songs are emblematic of the intricate process of transculturation that defined the diasporic experience in the New World. Reminiscent of Europe’s august and diverse balladry and Africa’s folk rituals, Ti Noel’s songs ascertain

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26 Over the course of twenty years, Ti Noel fathers twelve children, with whom he shares myths and legends of Mackandal.
the plasticity and assimilability of the epic oral traditions that were transplanted to the Americas. In the spirit of hybridization, Ti Noel’s compositions adapt elements of the French troubadours, Spanish ballads, and African folklore that were circulating throughout the colony of Saint-Domingue. In his hybridized adaptation of these ballad forms, Ti Noel inadvertently assumes the role of the epic bard or a mediating mouthpiece that narrates the collective memory. According to John Roberts, the epic bard’s main role stems from “preserving a sense of equilibrium between the actions of the hero and the values of the society” (Roberts 131).

In spite of the value that he holds as a mediator, Ti Noel cannot fulfill the visible role of an epic bard because of his assigned anonymity. Ti Noel is what W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson have come to acknowledge as the anonymous or “unknown” bard. In the final chapter of his critical text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois discusses the cultural transformation of Africanisms on American soil, using the Negro folk-song or spiritual tradition as a point of departure:

> The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of development […] The child sang it to his children and they to their children’s children, and so two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music. (Du Bois 180)

The spiritual tradition, like the epic ballad tradition, contributes to the diasporic experience and the construction of a collective memory, imagination, and history. From this diasporic experience emerges an historical icon, s/he who is remembered and imagined as the hero that is made epic over time.

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27 As Ed Morales explains in *The Latin Beat: The Rhythms And Roots Of Latin Music From Bossa Nova To Salsa And Beyond*, “The ballad was made popular by the troubadours who originated in southern France and became popular in neighboring Spain—the troubadour tradition was translated into various Romance languages” (120).
Within the narrative space of Ti Noel’s songs and stories, Mackandal embodies the role of that epic hero, for it is he who “offers African groups an important model of behavior for protecting themselves from threats to their survival and well being by acting to enhance their own collective power” (Roberts 134). In fact, Robert’s description of the African epic hero proves to be the spitting image of the one-armed Mackandal:

He is also usually distinguished by an unusual birth, threatened in his youth, removed from his home, and forced to undergo hardships and trial before returning to his people. Although the epic hero is invariably described as an exceptional person, he is not necessarily an individual possessed of extraordinary physical endowments or stature. For example, Sunjata the hero of one Mande epic, is described as crippled and infirm… (Roberts 125)

Like Sunjata, Mackandal is a cripple who lost his arm in a mechanical accident at the beginning of the novel.28 Ti Noel observes this incident and recounts the gory details:

Agarrada por los cilindros, que habían girado de pronto con inesperada rapidez, la mano izquierda de Mackandal se había ido con las cañas, arrastrando el brazo hasta el hombro. En la paila del guarapo se ensanchaba un ojo de sangre […] Mackandal tiraba de su brazo triturado, haciendo girar los cilindros en sentido contrario. Con su mano derecha trataba de mover codo, una muñeca que habían dejado de obedecerle. Atontada la mirada, no parecía comprender lo que le había ocurrido. Comenzaron a apretarle un torniquete de cuerdas en la axila, para contener la hemorragia. El amo ordenó que se trajera la piedra de amolar, para dar filo al machete que se utilizaría en la amputación. (Carpentier 18)

Rather than victimize Mackandal on account of his broken body, Ti Noel’s observations transform him into a stalwart survivor that ultimately bears a heroic legacy.

Mackandal’s physical dismemberment is indicative of his genealogical dismemberment, for he, like Ti Noel, is a diasporic orphan. It is important to recognize here that his master, Lenormand de Mezy, is responsible for the symbolic act of amputating Mackandal’s arm, for it is he that metaphorically dismembers Mackandal.

28 Coincidentally, Rosario Ferre signifies on this experience by including a similar scene in her novel, Maldito amor (1985). In the case of Maldito amor, the black slave, Don Calixto Diaz, loses his arm in Dona Elvira’s ingenio while cutting cane like his literary predecessor, Mackandal. Unlike Mackandal, however, Don Calixto’s presence in Ferre’s novel is trivial.
from his African lineage and his access to kinship. Because his mangled body now bears the scars of its own commodification, Mackandal is no longer viewed as a valuable piece of property: “un manco no era más que un manco” (21). The system of slavery has literally converted his captive body into a site of violence, resulting in his fateful displacement from the sugar mill to the pasture. Once Mackandal’s body is rendered disabled, he is granted access to the powerful realm of nature and the scared tutelage of the marooned witch, Mamán Loi. Ironically, Mackandal’s disability precipitates his metamorphosis into the novel’s most powerful character:

El manco Mackandal, hecho un houngán de rito Radá, investido de poderes extraordinarios por varias caídas en posesión de dioses mayores, era el Señor del Veneno. Dotado de suprema autoridad por los Mandatarios de la otra orilla, había proclamado la cruzada del exterminio, elegido, como lo estaba, para acabar con los blancos y crear un gran imperio de negros libres en Santo Domingo. (29)

Adamantly defying his physical and genealogical dismemberment, Mackandal fathers an African past and a Haitian future by providing his adoptive community with a myth of origins and a revolutionary trajectory. A mandinga from Guinea, Mackandal is deemed the wise mouthpiece of a sacred past; he is responsible for transmitting oral histories to his eager peers, including Ti Noel: 29

Con voz fingidamente cansada para preparar mejor ciertos remates, el mandinga solía referir hechos que habían ocurrido en los grandes reinos de Popo, de Arada, de los Nagós, de los Fulas. Hablaba de vastas migraciones de pueblos, de guerras seculares, de prodigiosas batallas en que los animales habían ayudado a los hombres. (Carpentier 13)

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29 In describing Mackandal as a mandinga, Carpentier writes: “Además, todo mandinga—era cosa sabida—ocultaba un cimarrón en potencia. Decir mandinga era decir díscolo, revoltoso, demonio. Por eso los de ese reino se cotizaban tan mal en los mercados de negros” (Carpentier 21). This literary description correlates with the Latin American Spanish definition of the word as it was historically recorded and still remains defined in the Diccionario de la lengua española de la Real Academia Española (DRAE) as “el diablo || príncipe de los ángeles rebelados.”
In his rendition of African history, Mackandal recounts *his/story* of Africa, by presenting a magical montage of wealth, war, and freedom that idealizes life in the kingdom of this world. As the patriarch of the Haitian Revolution, Mackandal bears an imaginary African genealogy that substitutes for the biological one he was denied in the shackles of slavery. As is made evident in the excerpt above, Mackandal’s vivid accounts of Africa allude to a unique relationship that exists between man and animal, much like the one exemplified by his metamorphosis at the end of Part One.\(^30\) Occurring over the course of four years, Mackandal’s metamorphosis was originally generated by his initial discovery of a “secret life” (19) in the pastures that he roamed after losing his arm in the *ingenio*.\(^31\) For that reason, I am interested in reading Mackandal’s metamorphosis as a rehabilitative form of disfigurement (animal disguise) that complements his mutilated body and allows him to recover corporeal wholeness:

De metamorfosis en metamorfosis, el manco estaba en todas partes, habiendo recobrado su integridad corpórea al vestir trajes de animales. Con alas un día, con agalllas el otro, galopando o reptando, se había adueñado del curso de los ríos subterráneos, de las cavernas de la costa, de las copas de árboles, y reinaba ya sobre la isla entera. Ahora, sus poderes eran ilimitados. (32)

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\(^{30}\) By celebrating animal metamorphosis (shape-shifting) as a foundational element of the vodou faith, Carpentier enters a dialogue on the transculturated tradition of therianthropy in the Americas. As a method of resistance used to combat colonialism and/or slavery, vodou metamorphosis can be traced back to the Mesoamerican tradition of *nagualismo* in which each person harbors an animal co-essence, the West African tradition of the shape-shifting trickster, and the Arawak tradition of the metamorphic man-jaguar. In the context of literature, Mackandal’s vodou metamorphosis echoes the shape-shifting adventures of those described in the Brazilian novel, *Macunaima* (1928). Written by Brazilian novelist, poet, and ethnomusicologist Mário de Andrade, *Macunaima* popularizes the indigenous language and culture of Brazil while incorporating various elements of the indigenous folklore that Andrade encountered in his own field research. Like Mackandal, Macunaima suffers dismemberment and undergoes multiple metamorphoses over the course of the novel. According to Bruce Dean Willis, Macunaima, “[The hero without any character] encompasses so many identities over the course of his Pan-Brazilian quest that the nature of any single, fixed essence he may have eludes us, or rather, his only fixed quality is change itself” (13).

\(^{31}\) Lydia Cabrera’s foundational ethnographic text, *El monte* (1954), hones in on the “secret life” of nature and the importance of the wilderness in Afro-Cuban religiosity. As a blueprint of an alternative theological universe, *El monte* maps out the syncretism of the Afro-Cuban existence and identity. As a metaphor for resistance and spiritual refuge, *el monte* embodies a marooned space, dismembered from slave society and the empirical episteme dominating the West.
The disability originally inscribed on to Mackandal’s body by his master is superseded by its metamorphic disfigurement and supernatural empowerment.

As a foundational element of the novel, the syncretic tension between opposing racial binaries and conflicting world-views is exhibited by Mackandal’s public execution, which is interpreted by the black spectators as a mythical return to Africa. According to Tommaso Scarano,

\textit{El reino de este mundo} is based on the coexistence of two contradictory visions of the world: the educated, rational, and empirical vision of the white dominators—the French colonizers—as against the mythic, supernatural and magical vision of the black slaves. These two visions logically exclude one another, but coexist in the historical, cultural, and racial reality of Haiti. (22)

Rather than mourning the sight of Mackandal’s burning corpse, the slaves rejoice in celebration, because death, according to vodou tradition, marks one’s return to the other shore, or “la otra orilla” (Carpentier 41). In denying the death of Mackandal, the slaves commit the ultimate act of defiance against the French, deconstructing the imperial notion of truth and instituting their own concept of reason based on the myth of the eternal return. According to Mircea Eliade, the myth of the eternal return is “a ‘history' that can be repeated indefinitely, in the sense that the myths serve as models for ceremonies that periodically reactualize the tremendous events that occurred at the beginning of time” (xiv). In the case of \textit{El reino}, “the beginning of time” is marked by the onset of the revolution and the initiation of the first black republic, two events that are dependent on the completion of Mackandal’s metamorphosis.

By uniting his vodou faith and his knowledge of poisonous plants, Mackandal becomes the chief rebel leader that essentially “conceived the bold design of uniting all the Negroes and driving the whites out of the colony” (James 20). As Mackandal’s
poison begins to penetrate pastures and stables, plantations and homes, Haiti’s white population becomes devastated by a reign of what is considered to be a mysterious form of black terror:

En la llanura sonaba, lúgubre, el mismo responso funerario, que era el gran himno del terror. Porque el terror enflaquecía las caras y apretaba las gargantas. A la sombra de las cruces de plata que iban y venían por los caminos, el veneno verde, el veneno amarillo, o el veneno que no tenía el agua, seguía reptando, bajando por las chimineas de las cocinas, colándose por las rendijas de las puertas cerradas, como una incontenible enredadera que buscara las sombras para hacer de los cuerpos sombras. (Carpentier 28)32

As an invisible and silenced form of contamination, this black terror, muted and magical by nature, initiates a dangerous war of the gods that is alluded to in the excerpt above. Using “las cruces de plata” to represent the Catholic Church’s weapon against the Africanized poison and “el veneno” to symbolize African religiosity, Carpentier creates an underlying religious discourse that associates Christianity with fear and Africanity with agency. This African agency is rooted in the vodou loas (lwas) or spirits that subverted Haiti’s colonial regime. According to Joseph Murphy’s discussion of Haitian vodou in *Working the Spirit*, “Vodou has been a potent force for organizing the disenfranchised majority of Haitian society, and if it has not always opposed tyranny, it has always remained a critical force against external authority” (14). Vodou can be regarded as a force with revolutionary potential, capable of organizing the black masses and undermining their opponents with something as invisible and dangerous as a natural poison. As an invisible force lurking below the surface, Mackandal’s poison infiltrates

32 *Sombras* play a crucial role in spiritual identity construction in Caribbean Creole religions such as Haitian Vodou, the Cuban denomination of Palo, and West Indian Obeah. From the traditional African (Congo) perspective, a *sombra* or spirit is “a force that has the capacity to separate itself and leave the physical entity” (Olmos and Paravisoni-Gebert 95). In the case of vodou, specifically, the *Gros bon ange (ombre-cadavre)* is defined as “One of three parts of individual Haitian Vodou identity, the double of the material body—something like spiritus but understood as the shadow cast by the body on the mind” (Olmos and Paravisoni-Gebert 253). The repeated use and double entendre of the *sombra* in this excerpt demonstrate the Creole/Caribbean syncretism that Carpentier puts forth in his text.
dominant society, much in the same way that his revolutionary ideology impacts the surrounding slave communities of the Atlantic world.33

Upon contemplating the trope of contamination that saturates Mackandal’s legacy in the white imagination, I would like to comment on the presence of Bouckman the Jamaican. As the personification of diasporic contamination, Bouckman is a metaphor for black bodies in motion, for he is a Jamaican living in Haiti. As Mackandal’s rebel successor, Bouckman assumes a leadership position in the revolution, adopting the role of a Papaloi or High Priest and serving as a mediator between his Haitian followers and the African gods:34

El Dios de los blancos ordena el crimen. Nuestros dioses nos piden venganza. Ellos conducirán nuestros brazos y nos darán la asistencia. ¡Rompan la imagen del Dios de los blancos, que tiene sed de nuestras lágrimas; escuchemos en nosotros mismos la llamada de la libertad! (Carpentier 50)

As this sacred mediator, or voice of limbo, Bouckman asserts his power in the darkness of Bois Caiman upon initiating his followers into a much-anticipated war of the gods:

Llegado a este punto, Bouckman dejó caer la lluvia sobre los árboles durante algunos segundos, como para esperar un rayo que se abrió sobre el mar. Entonces, cuando hubo pasado el retumbo, declaró que un Pacto se había sellado entre los iniciados de acá y los grandes Loas del África, para que la Guerra se iniciara bajo los signos propicios. (Carpentier 49)

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33 Although the Haitian Revolution made waves throughout the Black Atlantic, Cuba was one of the most dramatically affected societies in the Caribbean. In an effort to fulfill Haiti’s abandoned role as the region’s prominent sugar producer, Cuba increased its African slave importation, spawning a discourse of racial panic that was rooted in the fear of rebellion:

Before the calamitous ruin of the Colony of Saint-Domingue, and before the horrible destruction and unheard-of crimes committed there by the Negroses were known, the first thing that came to mind when the development of our island [Cuba] was discussed was the free and unlimited introduction of Negros…Experience has shown that […] it is necessary to proceed carefully […] in order that the number of Negroses may not only be prevented from exceeding that of whites, but that it may not be permitted to equal that number. (Childs 141)

Taken from Cuba’s Memorias de la Sociedad Económica, the above excerpt exemplifies the “temor al negro” that was circulating amongst Cuba’s fearful plantocracy in 1794, only three years into the Haitian Revolution (Ferrer 676).

34 In C.L.R. James’ The Black Jacobins, Papaloi is synonymous with the phrase “High Priest” (James 86).
It is important to take note of the rain in this scenario. As Mother Nature’s cleansing agent, rain has the ability to wash away one’s sins, one’s enemies, and one’s footprints. Interpreted as a super-natural phenomenon that connects the heavens and the earth, the rain symbolizes a message from the African gods who bestow protection upon their Haitian initiates on the eve of action. To thank the gods for this protection, Bouckman and his followers engage in a reciprocal dialogue that is marked by the ceremonial sacrificing of a pig:

El machete se hundió súbitamente en el vientre de un cerdo negro, que largó las tripas y los pulmones en tres aullidos. Entonces, llamados por los nombres de sus amos, ya que no tenían más apellido, los delegados desfilaron de uno en uno para untarse los labios con la sangre espumosa del cerdo, recogida en un gran cuenco de madera. Luego, cayeron de bruces sobre el suelo mojado…[y] juró que obedecería siempre a Bouckman. (Carpentier 50)

In order to exemplify the competing images of purification and pollution in this scenario, Carpentier signifies on the Old Testament’s story, The Plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-12). In this biblical episode, the enslaved Israelites (the chosen people) are the source of contagion for Pharaoh’s Egyptians. After Pharaoh refuses to free the Israeli slaves from the land of Egypt, God inflicts ten plagues upon his kingdom to punish his defiance. The most threatening of these ten plagues was the final one, which called for the death of all of Egypt’s firstborn sons. Upon inflicting this plague, God advises the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and smear its blood across their doors, purifying and purging them of Egypt’s sins: “The blood shall mark the houses where you [Israelites] live, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, sparing you a deadly stroke, as I strike down the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12, 71). As Mary Douglas explains in *Purity and Danger*, blood in the context of Hebrew religion, “was regarded as a source of life, and not to be touched except in the sacred conditions of sacrifice” (149). As a sacred source of life,
blood is that which saves the lives of Israeli firstborns and frees the Israelites from Pharaoh’s Egypt.

In his appropriation of the biblical, Carpentier practices admiration and theft as he proves that the black people at Bois Caiman are by no means Jewish, even though their story is. Carpentier uses the Jewish story as an allegory for the slaves’ situation, but distances himself from the Jewish tradition by creating a veiled, anti-Semitic discourse in which the sacred lamb is replaced by an unclean and scavenging pig. It is also important to note that the Israelites chose to flee Egypt and its persecution in a nationalistic effort to forge a collective ethnic identity. As the Hebrew scholar Ronald Hendel explains in his essay “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” the story of Passover marks the “birth of a people” as they migrate away from Egypt and towards a collective memory that contributes to the formation of an ethnic self-definition:

The processes of ethnic self-definition are evident in the symbolic rites of passage in the exodus story: the people are separated and delivered from the house of bondage; transformed into a new identity as the “people of Yahweh” at the holy mountain; and reincorporated into the Promised Land with their new identity in place. The story as whole defines the collective identity and ethnic boundaries of the people, providing a common foundation for social and religious life. (Hendel 621)

Carpentier, however, reverses the Jewish tradition of chosen flight and constructs a situation in which those presumed to be chosen (the black people of Haiti) stay in their land of persecution and expel their oppressors. Rather than provoking a black exodus, the sacrifice of a pig instigates a white flight that banishes all notions of whiteness from Haiti and its constitution. The narrative trajectory of this ceremonial scene at Bois Caiman illuminates the fact that Haiti, although a contested, orphaned territory, is recognized as a sacred homeland for her black non/citizens. Ultimately, Carpentier’s
narrative path Africanizes the Jewish tradition of rediscovering a homeland and allows
the black subjects to claim Haiti as their own. Therefore, Carpentier’s appropriation of
the Passover story, although inverted, yields the same objectives of nationalism and
ethnic identity construction as those exemplified in the Old Testament.

The nationalist undertones exhibited in Carpentier’s rendition of the ceremony at
Bois Caiman are representative of the collective Caribbean effort to create a legitimate
history, and therefore, a national genealogy. In spite of the poetic liberties taken to make
this scene stylistically and aesthetically moving, Carpentier’s passage exemplifies an
acute historical accuracy that correlates with the historical details found in C.L.R. James’
fundamental text, *Black Jacobins*:

> On the night of the 22nd a tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind
and heavy showers of rain. Carrying torches to light their way, the leaders of the
revolt met in an open space in the thick forests of the Morne Rouge, a mountain
overlooking Le Cap. There Boukman gave the last instructions and, after Voodoo
incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, he stimulated his
followers by a prayer spoken in creole, which, like so much spoken on such
occasions, has remained. (87)

When read in conjunction with James’ *Black Jacobins*, Carpentier’s literary depiction of
the meeting at Bois Caiman becomes a point of departure for the making of Haitian
history, a history that was previously made invisible by the dominant historiography. *El
reino* provides an historical narrative for all of the kinless captives and revolutionaries
that were essentially trying to build a genealogy for their adopted homeland. It is through
this nation-building project, the inception of the first black republic, that an imagined
community takes form. As Benedict Anderson explains in his foundational book,
*Imagined Communities*, this national conception of community is *imagined* because
regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the
nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this
fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

It is important to note that the imagined community, in spite of the solidarity it represents, is still subject to exploitation and the establishment of hierarchical structures. As the novel’s greatest antagonist and tragic villain, Henri Christophe corrupts the comradeship that is born out of the Haitian Revolution by reinstituting slavery and rebuilding an empire. When considered metaphorically, these actions could be interpreted as Christophe’s incessant effort to purge the trauma of orphanhood from his memory by comforting himself in the European trappings of imperialism. Christophe attempts to fill the void of his own absent ancestry by adopting and fathering five nameless African pages to serve as his personal attendants. These pages personify a vicious cycle of kinless-ness while repeating and revising the patriarchal pillars of the slave system.

Under Christophe’s control, the first black republic takes a totalitarian turn for the worst and confronts the reinstitution of slavery. As Ti Noel astutely observes, slavery acquires a most disturbing form in which a peculiar black-on-black power struggle emerges in the name of Christophe’s African self-loathing and European-inspired hubris:

[H]abía una infinita miseria en lo de verse apaleado por un negro, tan negro como uno; tan igual, tan mal nacido, tan marcado a hierro, posiblemente, como uno. Era como si en una misma casa los hijos pegaran a los padres, el nieto a la abuela, las nueras a la madre que cocinaba. (Carpentier 97)

The language of kinship is used here to illuminate the tragic irony and brutal violence that characterizes Christophe’s slavery system. More troublesome is the fact that Christophe relies on the enslavement of his own people to construct a European-inspired

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35 It should be noted here that the Martiniquois poet Aimé Césaire signifies on Carpentier’s motifs of namelessness, orphanhood, and invisibility in his 1969 play, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*. In this poetic rendition of Christophe’s tragic demise, Césaire, much like Carpentier, critiques the plight of human hubris while calling into question the ancestry of Haiti and her peoples.
citadel, which ironically commemorates the cultural legacy of the white population that was banished. As the ultimate symbol of the totalitarian dream, Christophe’s citadel is ironically Africanized in its impregnability, thanks to the sacrificial bulls’ blood that is mixed into the mortar:

Por algo aquellas torres habían crecido sobre un vasto bramido de toros degollados, desangrados, de testículos al sol, por edificadores conscientes del significado profundo del sacrificio, aunque dijeran a los ignorantes que se trataba de un simple adelanto en la técnica de la albañilería militar (Carpentier 98)

Henri Christophe proves to be a tyrant tormented by the contradiction that is embedded in his being the black emperor of a land in limbo; is Haiti the daughter of Africa or Europe? This question haunts Christophe throughout the entirety of his reign and contributes to the demise of his empire. As a self-proclaimed emperor attempting to trump the extravagance of his European counterparts (i.e. Napoleon Bonaparte), Christophe tries to erase his ties to Africa by placing himself on the “margen de la mística africanista de los primeros caudillos de la independencia haitiana, tratando en todo de dar a su corte un empaque europeo” (Carpentier 109). Taking his own life in order to escape a violent ousting, Christophe kills himself in an effort to kill the overwhelming sense of guilt that he feels upon realizing that his abandoned African roots (personified by the African pages) were the only source of constant loyalty he had ever know: “Pero ahora, cuando se hallaba solo, cuando sus duques, barones, generales, y ministros lo habían traicionado, los únicos que permanecían leales eran aquellos cinco africanos…” (Carpentier 109). In all of Christophe’s totalitarian lunacy, the reader is still tempted to sympathize with the tragic, political mulatto figure that he portrays.

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36 This guilt-ridden realization is repeated and revised in The Tragedy of King Christophe, as Christophe says his final words before committing suicide:
Carpentier exposes the ways in which the system of slavery renders the nuclear family model obsolete, while simultaneously rewriting a national (imagined) genealogy through the Haitian Revolution. Within the metaphorical frame of an anti-family that Carpentier puts forth, Mackandal personifies the dismembered patriarch, Ti Noel acts as an invisible, orphaned witness and Henri Christophe symbolizes the tragic political mulatto, tormented by his double dismemberment from Africa and Europe. Complicating his black-male dominated cast, Carpentier unexpectedly dedicates Part Two of his novel to Paulina Bonaparte, the only female character that receives full narrative attention.

Paulina’s Caribbean cameo appearance invests the text with historical accuracy while enhancing its syncretism and synchronism.37 Displaced from her usual imperial surroundings and dismembered from the novel’s narrative trajectory, Paulina’s presence in the Caribbean offers a commentary on the white woman’s body and sparks a discourse of corporeal difference that compromises the regal status initially defining her. As the sister of Napoleon and the wife of General Leclerc—the commander in chief of Napoleon’s expedition to restore slavery in the French colony—Paulina accompanies her husband to Haiti while he intends to combat the revolutionary fever and abolitionist contagion that was infecting the French Empire’s lucrative Caribbean properties (James 275). The infectious concept of abolition, initially spawned by the egalitarian motives of

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Africa, help me to go home, carry me like an aged child in your arms. Undress me and wash me. Strip me of all these garments, strip me as a man strips off dreams when the dawn comes...Strip me of my nobles, my nobility, my scepter, my crown. And wash me, oh wash me clean of their grease paint, their kisses, wash me clean of my kingdom. I’ll attend to the rest alone. (Césaire 90)

While Césaire is clearly riffing on Carpentier’s motif of tragic guilt, he is also reuniting an “aged child” with his lost mother. Césaire Africanizes Christophe’s death, transforming it from a consequence of hubris into a ritualistic return to Mother Africa.

37 According to Scarano, syncretism refers to “the ‘marvelous’ simultaneity of widely different cultures, races, religions, and histories,” while synchronism defines “the incongruous coexistence of autochthonous and allogenic, archaic and modern” (Scarano 21).
the French Revolution and exercised by the French Assembly in 1794, manifests itself in Haiti’s first constitution, comprised by the revolutionary hero, Toussaint Louverture in 1801 (Williams 251-252). Upon gaining consciousness of slavery’s abolition and Louverture’s acquisition of power, “Bonaparte set about betraying the principles of the French Revolution […] restoring Saint-Domingue to her ancient dependence and re-establishing the slave trade and slavery” under the “pretext of pacifying the country” (Williams 253).

For Paulina, however, this political expedition starts as an exoticized vacation to the other side of the Atlantic. Accompanied by a ship full of gazing men and Joseph Lavallée’s “lachrymose” novel, *Le Nègre comme il y a peu des blancs [The Negro Equalled by Few Europeans]*, Paulina is first presented in a profound moment of irony, for she is acquainting the reader with French abolitionist literature in the midst of her husband’s anti-abolitionist mission in Haiti. According to John Saillant, Lavallée’s antislavery text promotes “Republican brotherhood and Christian love” and develops the theme of benevolence through a homoerotic fascination with the black male body (96). In Saillant’s words, these “representations of the black male body allowed physical equality to hint of political equality, while homoeroticism hinted of the likeness and benevolence that might join black and white” (104).

Paulina’s book choice is not unprecedented considering the dramatic make-over she undergoes during her Caribbean rendezvous. Carpentier uses his poetic license to creolize Paulina’s already dark, Italian character in an effort to justify her ability to survive the plague: “Se reía cuando el espejo de su alcoba le revelaba que su tez, bronceada por el sol, se había vuelto la de una espléndida mulata” (Carpentier 75).
Conflated with the image of a splendid *mulata*, Paulina’s reflection reveals a racial hybridization that is supported in historical documents including *Secret History: or, the Horrors of St. Domingo, in a Series of Letters Written by a Lady at Cape Francois, to Colonel Burr, Late Vice-President of the United States, Principally during the Command of General Rochambeau*. According to a letter written by Leonora Sansay (under the pseudonym of Mary Hasal) describing Paulina Bonaparte, Paulina has a voluptuous mouth, and is rendered interesting by an air of languor which spreads itself over her whole frame. She was dressed in a muslin morning gown, with a Madras handkerchief on her head…[and] can do nothing but dance, and to dance alone is a triste resource. (8, 12)

Embedded in this description is a particularly telling subtext that includes several black stereotypes regarding Paulina’s physical appearance. Her “voluptuous mouth” becomes a euphemism for the thick lips often associated with African ancestry; her “air of languor” parallels the stereotype of the lazy African; the “Madras handkerchief on her head” signifies on the *tignon*, a West African inspired headdress that was made mandatory for female slaves and women of color under the colonial sumptuary laws; and her penchant for dance refers to her inherent Africanity. 38 This historical evidence certainly buttresses Carpentier’s literary depiction of Paulina’s racial hybridization. In addition to embracing a black persona, Paulina mysteriously braves the yellow fever plague and abruptly claims the Haitian island of La Tortue as her native territory. 39 This claim proves to be rather bold because it disqualifies her elite European status and figuratively erases her

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38 (Everett 34) and (Saint-Méry 62): Everett explains the *tignon laws* in "Free Persons of Color in Colonial Louisiana," and Saint-Méry makes reference to the prominence of the *tignon* in black Haitian attire.
39 Located off the northwestern coast of Haiti, La Tortue (Tortuga) is a small island that originally served as the capital of the French colony of Saint-Domingue before it was moved to the mainland of Hispaniola in 1676 (James 4).
whiteness. With the abandonment of her whiteness comes the adoption of her blackness, the only explicable force protecting her against the plague of yellow fever.

Disrupting her Caribbean dream, the plague of yellow fever quickly transforms Paulina’s vacation into a tropical nightmare:

Pero una tarde, el peluquero francés que la peinaba con ayuda de cuatro operarios negros, se desplomó en su presencia, vomitando una sangre hedionda, a medio coagular. Con su corpiño moteado de plata, un horroroso aguafiestas había comenzado a zumbar en el ensueño tropical de Paulina Bonaparte. (Carpentier 73)

This excerpt juxtaposes the subtexts of white susceptibility and black immunity that distinguish Paulina from her white French counterparts. As the excerpt explains, a French hairstylist is infected by the plague, while his four black assistants remain immune. Like her hairstylist’s black assistants, Paulina resists the plague and consequently emerges as a hybridized (mulata) character that exhibits immunity to yellow fever much in the same way that Sierva María of Del amor y otros demonios displays susceptibility to rabies, which I discuss in the following section. Although the plague fails to infect Paulina, it infects her husband’s failing mission. As Leclerc’s fierce antagonist, yellow fever maintains a prominence that is exemplified in an historical letter written by Leclerc to the French Minister of the Navy on June 6th, 1802:

I ordered the chief officer of health to draw up a report for me on this sickness. According to this report it seems that this sickness is that which is called Yellow fever or Siamese disease; that this sickness reigns every year in the Antilles […] The sickness attacks equally those who are in comfortable positions and who care for themselves well, and those whose means do not permit them to take precautions necessary to their health. (James 331-332)

Upon discovering the pervasiveness and nondiscriminatory nature of this Haitian plague, Leclerc urges Paulina to flee to the island of La Tortue in the spirit of white flight. Because of its close proximity to Haiti’s northern coast, La Tortue only proves to be a
safe refuge for so long. When Leclerc arrives bearing disease, all notions of safety are contested and his white body is rendered vulnerable and abject: “Una tarde, Leclerc desembarcó en la Tortuga con el cuerpo destemplado por siniestros escalofríos. Sus ojos estaban amarillos” (Carpentier 75).

Unaware of her own hybridized immunity against the plague, Paulina ultimately seeks bodily protection from the black slave, Solimán: “La agonía de Leclerc, acreciendo su miedo, la hizo avanzar más aún hacia el mundo de poderes que Solimán invocaba con sus conjuros, el verdadero amo de la isla” (Carpentier 76). Bearing vivid Orientalized images of the Arab Odalisque and her emasculated eunuch servant, the relationship between Paulina and Solimán introduces a profane dynamic in which the often-nude Paulina gains pleasure from the services of Solimán’s enslavement:

Al principio, [Paulina] se hacía dar masajes por sus camaristas francesas; pero pensó un día que la mano de un hombre sería más vigorosa y ancha, y se aseguró los servicios de Solimán, antiguo camarero de una casa de baños, quien, además de cuidar de su cuerpo, la frotaba con cremas de almendras, la depilaba y le pulía las uñas de los pies. Cuando se hacía bañar por él, Paulina sentía un placer maligno en rozar, dentro del agua de la piscina, los duros flancos de aquel servidor a quien sabía eternamente atormentado por el deseo, y que la miraba siempre de soslayo, con una falsa mansedumbre de perro muy ardido por la tralla. (Carpentier 72)

The enthusiasm and meticulous care with which Solimán attends to Paulina’s body adds a sadomasochistic dynamic to this scene of subjection. Best articulated through Hortense Spiller’s discussion of the eroticized struggle for power, Solimán is “the captive body [that] becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality,” which is further objectified and translated into a transgressive source of pleasure (67).

Solimán’s sensuality is further embellished in the following passage describing the erotic ritual intended to protect Paulina’s body against the plague:
Una mañana, las camaristas francesas descubrieron con espanto que el negro ejecutaba una extraña danza en torno a Paulina, arrodillada en el piso, con la cabellera suelta. Sin más vestimenta que un cinturón del que colgaba un pañuelo blanco a modo de cubre sexo […] Solimán saltaba como un pájaro, blandiendo un machete enmohecido. Ambos lanzaban gemidos largos, como sacados del fondo del pecho, que parecían aullidos de perro en noche de luna. (Carpentier 77)

Including stereotypical images of animalization and eroticism, this scene borders on cliché and emphasizes Paulina’s racial hybridization through the release of her sexual inhibitions and her faith in vodou. Paulina’s participation exemplifies a twisted transcendence of cultural, racial, and sexual boundaries that ultimately pushes her into an unexpected state of racial hybridity that is accentuated by her intimacy with the black Solimán.

At this point, I would like to comment on Paulina’s sexuality as it relates to her racialized characterization and rhetorical positioning in relation to Solimán. In his essay, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” Sander Gilman enters the aesthetic sphere in order to trace the roots of sexual deviancy that have historically marked the black body. Delving into the visual representation of racial archetypes, Gilman asserts,

By the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general; as we have seen, the black figure appears almost always paired with a white figure of the opposite sex. (Gilman 209)

Strategically positioning the black body of a servant next to the sexualized body of a white woman, these visual representations accentuate the sexual similarities that span across racial boundaries, much like Carpentier’s depiction of Paulina and Solimán. Starting the voyage as European royalty, Paulina’s sexuality is restrained, properly manifesting “the covert sexuality of the white woman” (Gilman 212). By the end of her
trip, however, browned by the sun and captivated by Solimán’s erotic rituals, Paulina’s sexuality manifests itself in an “overt” fashion, paralleling the racial stereotypes marking her shift in appearance.

It is important to note that Paulina’s body remains sexualized even after her presence in the text has expired. Following her husband’s death, Paulina returns to Paris and Solimán is relocated to Rome, where he serves Christophe’s exiled wife and children. In spite of this displacement, Solimán continues to operate within the Hegelian confines of his former slave-master relationship. In an intoxicated state of longing and desperation for his master Paulina, Solimán stumbles upon the Borghese statue collection and is abruptly confronted by the oddly familiar Venus of Canova (Paulina Bonaparte as the Venus Victrix):

> El conocía aquel semblante; y también el cuerpo, el cuerpo todo, le recordaba algo. Palpó el mármol ansiosamente, con el olfato y la vista metidos en el tacto. Sopesó los senos. Paseó una de sus palmas, en redondo, sobre el vientre, deteniendo el meñique en la marca del ombligo. Acarició el suave hundimiento del espinazo, como para voltear la figura. Sus dedos buscaron la redondez de las caderas, la blandura de la corva, la tersura del pecho. Aquel viaje de las manos le refrescó la memoria trayendo imágenes de muy lejos. El había conocido en otros tiempos aquel contacto. (Carpentier 122)

In this erotic encounter with the Venus, Solimán fantasizes that the statue is Paulina and engages in a sexual act that echoes the sadomasochistic pleasure he received from their expired relationship. In the European context, Solimán gains the ability to transform his now absent captor into a fetishized object of desire. By reversing the erotic roles previously assigned to the captive and captor in Spillers’ aforementioned essay, Carpentier perverts the perverse, adding a new fetishistic element to the abjection of enslavement.
Regardless of the fact that little critical attention has been paid to Paulina’s unexpected appearance in Carpentier’s foundational historical fiction, *El reino de este mundo*, I would suggest that Paulina personifies the volatile body. Although she does not succumb to yellow fever, Paulina exhibits a corporeal assimilability to blackness. She, like Mackandal, undergoes her own racial metamorphosis and thus symbolizes a highly evolved character that can disguise itself in order to adapt to the hostile landscapes that surround her. Just as Mackandal defies his physical dismemberment and escapes white terror under the guise of an animal, Paulina successfully flees the danger of plague by “going native” or disguising herself in *mulatez*. By performing *mulatez*, as is demonstrated by her darkened skin, madras *tignon*, and penchant for dance, Paulina is in essence a contaminated version of her white, European self. Her body might not be broken or dismembered, but her racial purity and genealogical legitimacy are undoubtedly amputated from imperial certainty. In conclusion, I would propose that Carpentier’s full-bodied characters, regardless of the limbs that they are missing or the kinships that they are denied, are those that can adapt, defy, and survive via metamorphosis or hybridization.

*Del amor y otros demonios*

Gabriel García Márquez’ *Del amor y otros demonios* received little critical attention in spite of its bearing a profound subtext that mocks the establishment of the Inquisition and celebrates the Africanization of Colombia’s Caribbean coastline. Setting his novel in eighteenth century Cartagena de Indias, García Márquez focuses on the racial dichotomy that separates the fearful from the contaminated and critiques the profoundly ironic moments that adorn Colombian history. As a colonial stronghold for the Spanish
Crown, Cartagena de Indias proved to be a thriving territory of cultural convergence. Maintaining a prominent population of African descendants, Amerindians, and Spaniards, Cartagena de Indias was the site of a transculturation that ultimately called for the Crown’s installation of the infamous Inquisition, which lasted from 1610 to 1660 (McKnight 63). Religion and spirituality were perhaps the most crucial components of this transculturation, as they quickly became a dangerous cultural battleground amidst the social soil of Cartagena. Threatening the Crown, heretics and those who strayed away from Catholic orthodoxy were accused of engaging in diabolical practices and sinful activities that would tarnish the image and destroy the society of its rulers. The Inquisition was implanted in the Americas as early as 1570 and represented the effort to combat the systems of knowledge and belief that existed outside of the Catholic scope: “error en el entendimiento, con pertinacia en la voluntad, contrario a la verdad de la católica fe” (Álvarez Alonso 239). Departing from the traditional European hierarchy dominated by white males, African-based religions were considered highly suspect forms of magic or witchcraft that could potentially contaminate the New World and its order, which had a religious base. The transculturation of African and indigenous practices threatened the Church because these practices were representative of the potentially dangerous mysteries associated with Cartagena’s population of color. The authorities (the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church) depended on the Inquisition as a vehicle for preventing the subversion of Europe’s social order and racial norms.

The juxtaposition of resistance forms and the struggle for power that came to characterize colonial Cartagena proved to be a profound source of interest to Gabriel García Márquez, as it is undoubtedly a central theme in his novel, Del amor y otros
Demonios (1994). Depicting a young girl’s exploration of self, society, and the sacred during the twilight of the eighteenth century, Del amor y otros demonios presents an image of Cartagena de Indias that is rich in corruption, scandal, and hypocrisy. As the protagonist and central character of controversy, Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles represents an unusual hybrid of whiteness and blackness, the acceptable and the forbidden, the sacred and the diabolical. Using her conflicted character and vulnerable body as a vehicle for mocking the Inquisition and celebrating the cultural contamination that will forever linger as Cartagena’s legacy, Gabriel García Márquez depicts the impossibility of family in a society that is as fervently hostile as that of colonial Cartagena de Indias. Through the decomposition and demise of the heteronormative nuclear family, a strong cast of othered/queered bodies emerges, offering a compelling commentary on the pitfalls of patriarchy and the failures of the Inquisition.

The novel opens with the modern day (1949) excavation of a series of burial crypts that were being emptied in an effort to prepare the property formerly known as the historical convent of Santa Clara for a new project that would construct a five star hotel in its place. Arriving at the excavation site as a young reporter, Gabriel García Marquéz adopts the narrative voice and encounters a cryptic surprise that would immediately refer his imagination back to the legend that his grandmother shared with him as a child:

mi abuela me contaba de niño la leyenda de una marquesita de doce años cuya cabellera le arrastraba como una cola de novia, que había muerto del mal de rabia

40 Gabriel García Márquez was born in Aracataca, Colombia on March 6, 1927. He was raised by his maternal grandparents and highly influenced by his grandmother’s story telling as well as her affinity for the magical, superstitious, and supernatural (Simons 3). Working for El Universal in Cartagena and El Heraldo in Baranquilla, García Marquéz’ early journalism career granted him access to Colombia’s Caribbean coastline and offered him an invaluable perspective on Colombian-Caribbean culture (Bell 6). García Marquéz eventually emerged as one of the Boom generation’s most prominent and prolific writers, using both realism and magical realism to capture the Latin American experience.
por el mordisco de un perro, y era venerada en los pueblos del Caribe por sus muchos milagros. (11)

From that signed prologue, the reader advances to chapter one of the novel, a flashback to colonial Cartagena, a market scene in which Sierva María is out with her mulata servant in search of party decorations for her twelfth birthday celebration. Amidst the mundane market backdrop, a stray dog, later proven to be rabid, bites Sierva María’s ankle. From that point on, Sierva María’s body (regardless of its actual contraction of rabies) begins to decay in conjunction with the nuclear family model and its ties to expiring nobility.

Using a rabid dog bite as his point of departure, Gabriel García Marquéz opens his historical fiction with an explicit commentary on race and otherness in colonial Cartagena. Within the first pages of the novel, Sierva María’s identity is compromised by an unspeakability that stems from her illegitimacy, indecipherable body, and forced dismemberment. Abruptly rejected by her birth parents during the earliest stage of her infancy, Sierva María is dismembered from the heteronormative nuclear family model and displaced to the slave quarters, where she lives comfortably under the care and discretion of the family’s black slaves:

Traspuesta en el patio de los esclavos, Sierva María aprendió a bailar desde antes de hablar, aprendió tres lenguas africanas al mismo tiempo, a beber sangre de gallo en ayunas y a deslizarse por entre los cristianos sin ser vista ni sentida, como un ser inmaterial. (García Márquez 60)

This domestic displacement is not entirely uncommon given the historical circumstances and the nature of urban slavery. As Gilberto Freyre expounds in his work, The Masters and the Slaves, the subjugated presence of black slaves in the big house had a

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41 García Marquéz’ maternal grandmother, Doña Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes, was responsible for introducing him to legends like this.
fundamental impact on the familial dynamics and relationships between the white masters and their children.

Although her white skin and copper hair are essential elements of her passing as pure nobility, Sierva María’s racial illegitimacy and black upbringing justify her alleged contraction of rabies and validate the ostracism that she has to face. Sierva María’s racial Achilles heel lies in the contaminated bloodline of her mestiza mother Bernarda, “hija de indio ladino y blanca de Castilla” (García Márquez 58). García Márquez’ use of the word ladino here is particularly compelling because it contributes to the limpieza de sangre discourse driving the Inquisition of colonial Cartagena. Within the context of Spanish-speaking Latin America, ladino has come to bear several different meanings. According to the *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Empire, 1402-1975,*

> In New Spain, the term *ladino* referred to acculturated African slaves who had lived in Spain or the Caribbean before arriving to New Spain. Because *ladinos* already spoke Spanish and understood Spanish ways, they were in much greater demand than *bozales* (slaves brought fresh from Africa) […] In Central America, the word *ladino* did not apply to blacks, but was used interchangeably with the term mestizo. (Burnett 350)

In order to maintain the trope of racial contamination that contributes to Bernarda’s mestizaje, García Márquez consciously uses the term as a marker of ancestral impurity. Reading *ladino* as a racial marker emphasizes Bernarda’s ambitious agenda of marrying the Marquis for the purpose of “improving the race” or *adelantar la raza* (advancing the race), a form of upward class mobility used by women of color or dubious ancestry throughout Latin America (Andrews 47).^{42} Bernarda’s seduction of the Marquis fits this

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^{42} In Cuba, the concept of “improving the race” is denoted by the phrase *adelantar la raza* (advancing the race), which is accomplished by marrying a white person and producing lighter-colored offspring (Andrews 47). This practice was prominent in colonial Mexico as well and yielded an elaborate vocabulary for describing the progeny of adelantados that included terms like *castizo* (a light-skinned mestizo) and *morisco* (a light skinned mulatto) (Katzew 3).
pattern of the *adelantada*. After seducing the Marquis and announcing that she is pregnant with his child, Bernarda manipulates him into marriage and reminds him that she was not black. Therefore, by marrying the Marquis and giving birth to the outwardly white Sierva María, Bernarda advances her class status and passes for white: “la única aguja para zurcir la honra era el matrimonio formal” (García Márquez 58).

It is incongruous, however, that a pale-skinned, blue-eyed child could emerge from the tainted equation of a white father and an Other mother. Perhaps García Márquez is suggesting that whiteness is constructed around the marginalization of blackness. In that case, I will evaluate Sierva María’s whiteness as a metaphor that parallels Ralph Ellison’s “Optic White” in his groundbreaking novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). As the Liberty Paint Company’s most famed color, “Optic White” is the “purest white that can be found,” but cannot be obtained without the addition of ten “dead black” liquid drops (Ellison 202). While trying to achieve this shade of white, Ellison’s nameless narrator recalls slowly measuring “the glistening black drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges” (200). According to Harryette Mullen’s analysis of “Optic White,” Ellison uses irony to point out that “no pure product of [the] America[s], including the linguistic, cultural, and genetic heritage of its people, has emerged without being influenced by over three hundred years of multicultural collaboration and conflict” (74). Nevertheless, Liberty’s “white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through.” (Ellison 217).

Sierva María’s whiteness is not nearly as durable or deceptive as that of Liberty Paint and must be learned against her own will. Sierva María’s father tries to “teach” her
whiteness in a desperate attempt to heal the potentially rabid dog bite on her ankle:

“Trató de enseñarla a ser blanca de ley, de restaurar para ella sus sueños fallidos de noble criollo…” (García Márquez 66). In his attempt to ingrain whiteness, the Marquis educates Sierva María about the luxuries of nobility and the artistic products of white, European culture:

La casa se llenó de cuantas bailarinas de cuerda, cajas de música y relojes mecánicos se habían visto en las ferias de Europa. El marqués desempolvo la tiorba italiana. La encordó, la afinó con una perseverancia que sólo podía entenderse por el amor, y volvió a acompañarse las canciones de antaño cantadas con la buena voz y el mal oído que ni los años ni los turbios recuerdos habían cambiado. (García Márquez 68)

This excerpt is particularly significant because it presents whiteness as a genealogical object. Exposing his daughter to family heirlooms and songs from the Old World, the Marquis asserts a specific family history, legacy, or heritage that is linked to a kinship system that acts as a marker of whiteness. This focus on kinship and genealogy is important for the construction of modern cultures. As Richard Dyer explains in White, “Racial genealogy tells histories of populations, generally winding up in the mists of time, to show how environment and tradition have moulded the appearance and character of the people in question” and as is made clear through the superiority complex of the white race—“to have a history is one splendid thing” (20). Echoing Dyer, to have a family history or a lineage intact is to be white. In spite of his efforts, the Marquis is forced to realize that his dreams of raising a noble daughter have expired at his own expense. Sierva María’s assumed contraction of rabies stains her whiteness, steals her freedom, and dismembers her from dominant society.

Over the course of the novel, Sierva María undergoes a drastic evolution from Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles to María Mandinga, which yields, when translated,
the name “Sierva María de Todos los Demonios.” Diógenes Fajardo V. supports the translation of *mandinga’s* double entendre based on the ethnocentric association that *mandinga* has with the devil, irritation, and fury (Fajardo V. 94). Paralleling all three terms associated with *mandinga*, are the symptoms of rabies, which Sierva María supposedly exhibits after her encounter with a rabid dog. According to “Obsesión, posesión, y opresión en *Del amor y otros demonios,*” rabies is a disease of the blacks, not the nobility (Deaver 80) and therefore associated with devil possession and all that is uncivilized. Even the Bishop makes the devil’s link to rabies quite clear when he states, “<<Digan lo que digan los médicos>>…<<la rabia en los humanos suele ser una de las tantas artimañas del Enemigo>>” (García Márquez 79).

As a “disease of the blacks” and therefore a disease of the devil, rabies inherits a practice of unspeakability, a silence that detains it from the dominant discourse, making it an invisible form of pollution: “Sin embargo, los dramas más terribles no pasaban a la historia, pues ocurrían entre la población negra, donde escamoteaban a los mordidos para tratarlos con magias africanas en los palenques de cimarrones” (García Márquez 21).

Believed to be exclusive to black people, rabies did not pose a threat to the white population, and was, therefore, omitted from the dominant discourse. By omitting black victims of rabies from the historical dialogue, the hegemony commits what theorist James Snead calls a conscious act of “exclusion by reversal, distortion, or some other form of censorship” (6). According to Snead,

Omission and exclusion are perhaps the most widespread tactics of racial stereotyping but are also the most difficult to prove because their manifestation is precisely absence itself. The repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of obscurity and dependence. (6)
The white act of black omission inspires a profound racial misunderstanding that is based on the societal desire to place blackness within the confines of absence.

Interestingly enough, the first character to rightfully doubt Sierva María’s contraction of rabies is a contaminated counterpart, Abrenuncio de Sa Pereira Cao, “el médico más notable y controvertido de la ciudad” (García Márquez 27). Curiously donning a Portuguese last name in Spanish Cartagena, Abrenuncio’s surname serves as a telling racial marker that can only be the source of the controversy with which he is simultaneously introduced. According to *Jewish Family Names and Their Origins: An Etymology Dictionary*, Sephardic Jews associated with the lineage *Abendana* or *Dana* (“son of a man who professes his religion”) adopted the surname *Pereira* to pass as *conversos* or crypto-Jews (Guggenheimer 181). Abrenuncio’s *Abendana* is particularly ironic since he identifies as an atheist and his first name, when translated from Latin, means “I renounce” (ostensibly the Devil, but in this case God or Christ). Rooted in Abrenuncio’s surname *Pereira* (pear tree) is a long history of persecution and expulsion based on his Jewish ancestry and therefore, in the context of Christian Spain, polluted bloodlines.

When the *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) phenomenon swept fifteenth century Spain, the first among those to be persecuted were the Jews, a people historically stigmatized in Castilian culture as “the feminized antitype of virile Christian masculinity” and “the original source of sodomy” (Rosenstock 207). The first written account of this accusation can be found in the anonymous polemic publication, the *Libro llamado alboraique* (*Book called Alboraique*), which surfaced in Spain during the latter half of the fifteenth century and stated that “La sodomía es venida de los judios” [“Sodomy came
from the Jews”] (Mirrer 73). Christian orthodoxy argued that Jews threatened the social and sexual orders of Spanish society and could no longer be tolerated. Jews, in Christian orthodoxy, were violators of the divine order, or rather, demonic enemies of Christ (Rosenstock 207). With these ideas about Jews contaminating their Christian conscience, the Catholic Monarchs issued an Edict of Expulsion that banished Jews from Spain in 1492 and simultaneously “triggered a wave of conversions among Jews reluctant to face the hardships of exile” (Bodian 9). Portugal quickly followed Spain’s suit, forcing Spain’s Jewish exiles to undergo conversion through baptism and expelled those who refused in 1497. The influx of Spanish conversos and crypto-Jews in Portugal was dramatic enough to make the terms Portuguese and Jewish synonymous in future racial discourse (Bodian 13).

The Iberian Jews who rejected the denial and secrecy characterizing Christian conversion and crypto-Judaism immigrated to the Netherlands in search of religious freedom and prosperity. Jews in the Netherlands established a sense of community and ultimately branched out to the New World, flooding the Dutch West Indies as well as the Caribbean constituencies of Portugal and Spain, in spite of the prohibition placed on their emigration to Spanish and Portuguese dominions. Members of the transgressive counter-diaspora characterized by the deceptive conversos and crypto-Jews that were passing as Christians did the same, covertly occupying the unprotected territories of the Americas, much like Abrenuncio.

43 Alboraique can also be spelled as Aborayque. Jewish scholar, Miriam Bodian dates the text back to the 1460s in her essay “Men of the Nation”: The Shaping of Converso Identity in Early Modern Europe” while Louise Mirrer in her book Women, Jews, and Muslims in the Texts of Reconquest Castile and David Gitlitz in his essay “Hybrid Conversos in the ‘Libro llamado el Alboraique’” contend that the text emerged in the 1480s.
The fact that Abrenuncio is a crypto-Jew living as a heretical bachelor in colonial Cartagena leads me to question his sexuality. Lest we forget, orthodox Christianity viewed Jewish men as effeminates and originators of sodomy. Characterized by circumcision, the male Jew is often viewed as a victim of castration, de-gendered and emasculated by the tradition-based alteration of the phallus. Sander Gilman takes note of Freud’s argument stating that circumcision, a “substitute for a castration,” was a “cure for the diseases associated with masturbation […] and the sexual disease of the Jewish male”—homosexuality (Gilman 71). Abrenuncio’s queer sexuality proves to be contingent on his Jewish ancestry; to be queer is to be unanchored in gender and to be unanchored in gender is to be Jewish. Because Jews were capable of polluting Spanish bloodlines, were they also believed to be capable of polluting everything else, including sexuality?

That question leads me into a discussion of the suspicious interaction between Abrenuncio and Father Cayetano Delaura. Although Delaura does not self-identify as queer, he does have a tainted ancestry that makes him more susceptible to sexual contamination:

Estaba convencido de que su padre era descendiente directo de Garcilaso de la Vega, por quien guardaba un culto casi religioso, y lo hacía saber de inmediato. Su madre era una criolla de San Martín de Loba, en la provincia de Mompox, emigrada a España con sus padres. Delaura no creía tener nada de ella hasta que vino al Nuevo Reino de Granada y reconoció sus nostalgias hereciadas. (García Márquez 104)

Ironically, Delaura prides himself on being a descendant of Spain’s most famous and “only pagan” poet, Garcilaso, yet he subtly dismisses the possibility of bearing any resemblance to his criolla mother. Delaura’s dissociation from his criolla mother is a consequence of the damning rhetoric that is used to characterize the Americas. In spite of
this rhetoric, Delaura expresses a slight fascination with the Caribbean when he states the following: “He oído decir que nuestros clérigos enloquecen de felicidad en las Indias” (García Márquez 106). This “madness” is reminiscent of the images associated with what the late nineteenth century translator and adventurer Richard Francis Burton called the “Sotadic Zone.” According to Burton’s “Terminal Essay” closing his translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, the “Sotadic Zone” refers to a region made exotic by its heat and homoeroticism. Burton developed the concept of the “Sotadic Zone” in order to explain the prevalence and in some cases, acceptance of sodomy and homosexuality in specific regions of the world (Burton 145). Although Burton’s concept of the “Sotadic Zone” predates the colonial period, García Márquez may be familiar with the concept as when the Bishop degrades the Caribbean while inadvertently confirming its Sotadic tendencies: “Es un reino amenazado por la sodomía, la idolatría y la antropofagia” (García Márquez 106).

García Marquéz takes this Sotadic motif full circle when he places the young Delaura into a homoerotic situation with the wise racial Other, Abrenuncio. Lost in the throes of sexual infatuation and moral confusion regarding his relationship with Sierva María, Delaura proves to be in a vulnerable state and seeks help from Abrenuncio. Upon meeting his Catholic foil in the young and impressionable Delaura, Abrenuncio transforms their homosocial reunion into a homoerotic situation. Abrenuncio, therefore, seizes this opportunity to engage Delaura in a healing dialogue that is rife with homoerotic undertones:

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Abrenuncio lo miró a los ojos, hasta el fondo del alma, se dio cuenta de que [Delaura] estaba a punto de llorar. <<No se atormente en vano>>, le dijo con un tono sedante. <<Tal vez sólo haya venido porque necesitaba hablar de ella [Sierva María] >>. Delaura se sintió desnudo. Se levantó, buscó los rumbos de la puerta,
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y no escapó en estampida porque estaba a medio vestir. Abrenuncio lo ayudó a ponerse la ropa todavía mojada, mientras trataba de demorarlo para seguir la charla. <<Con usted conversaría sin parar hasta el siglo venturo>>, le dijo [Abrenuncio]. (García Márquez 156)

Although Delaura makes it clear that Sierva María is the sexual object of desire, he accepts the undeniable chemistry that he shares with Abrenuncio. This chemistry, however, transcends the boundaries of physical attraction and catapults into the sacred space of shared intelligence, a mutual attraction of the minds. Although Abrenuncio and Delaura know that this relationship could never be pursued in colonial Cartagena, they are aware of their ability to cultivate it, thanks to Sierva María, the driving force of their interaction. Because women are what Gayle Rubin calls the “conduit” of male relationships (174), Sierva María becomes the glue that binds the men’s desire for each other. While this desire does necessarily find expression in sexual activity, it does reflect Eve Sedgwick’s understanding of “male homosocial desire” that is founded upon the erotic (2). Sierva María is the racially contaminated white female is the bond for this forbidden desire between the crypto-Jew and the Catholic priest.

I would like to note that both Father Delaura and Abrenuncio are queer men disrupting the pattern of patriarchy and the perpetuation of the heteronomative family model. Because Delaura is committed to his celibacy and Abrenuncio is fixed in his solitude, neither man runs the risk of transgressing their queer boundaries by reproducing new citizens (or their own sexual citizenship for that matter). Because both men live on the margins of society, they do not embody citizenship: Abrenuncio is a crypto-Jew, essentially living in hiding, and Delaura is a citizen of the closed microcosmic society that exists within the confines of the monastery. Stuck in lock step, these two men,
according to M. Jacqui Alexander’s discussion of homo- and heterosexual citizenship in the post-colonial Caribbean, are regarded as non-citizens or social deviants:

Not just an (any) body can be a citizen any more, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the survival of the nation.” (“Not Just (Any) Body” 6)

This excerpt coincides with Kristeva’s argument regarding the sexually abject as well:

“Defilement is the stopping of life; (like) sexuality without reproduction,” which is essentially, homosexuality (Kristeva 85).

Sierva María and Abrenuncio prove to be literary doubles, as they both embrace their contamination in an effort to make themselves invisible. In their occupation of invisibility, both Sierva María and Abrenuncio are forced into a state of limbo that emerges with society’s inability to read or decipher their “othered” bodies. This racial indeterminacy is supported by invisibility, and invisibility can only be occupied by the kinless—black slaves and the Jewish Abrenuncio. Abrenuncio’s state of orphanhood is induced by what Gilman refers to as the “unknowability” of the Jew. As Gilman explains, “the essence of the Jewish body is too well known to be hidden and too well hidden to be known. It is ‘canny’ and ‘uncanny’ simultaneously” (Gilman 42). The essence of “unknowability” in Abrenuncio’s case is rooted in his questionable racial, ethnic, and sexual orientations, all of which he suppresses in the name of assimilation. Assimilation, as a component of invisibility allows Abrenuncio to adopt a “performative and ‘hybrid’ selfhood that disrupts [and sustains] the seemingly stable binarisms” that construct dominant culture and society (Rosenstock 205). This hybridized persona allows Abrenuncio to pass as the assimilated Other who endures a transgressive limbo,
“‘insider-outsider’” experience (Rosenstock 206). It is important to remember that Abrenuncio is a doctor, which grants him access to the privileged white members of Cartagena’s society. Nevertheless, his bachelor status and reading habits are the performances of an Other who is never fully assimilated. Living secretly amongst the forbidden literary heroes of the Old World, Abrenuncio challenges the limitations of heteronormativity that organize dominant society. Much like his literary predecessor don Quijote, Abrenuncio finds pleasure in the pages of polluted literature and commits himself to the peculiar world of solitude, which philosopher Georges Bataille reserves for eroticism and transgression (389). Abrenuncio’s solitary act of reading becomes a metaphor for masturbation and an additional marker of his queerness.

Because of her ambiguity and invisibility, Sierva María proves to be the novel’s most dangerous character, for she embodies the figure of the metaphorical mulata. Using her invisibility as a vehicle, Sierva María manages to float freely through racially demarcated spaces, much like the dangerous free person of color that haunts the white imagination of colonial slave society. As the most highly feared components of Cartagena’s collective black population, free people of color and cimarrones occupied dangerous visible and invisible spaces, respectively, that increased the possibility of colonial contamination through miscegenation:

Both hybridity and marronage function as tactics of cultural resistance within an imposed structure of power, such as colonialism or slavery. While neither completely annihilates the overarching system, each manages to destabilize it through a perpetual questioning of or repositioning against that system. By continually securing or creating an alternate discursive existence within the structure, both processes undermine the leveling impulses of colonial or imperial hegemony. (Olsen 124)
Free blacks were considered particularly dangerous in the minds of white colonists because of their access and ability to contaminate dominant society:

[Ellos] residían en todo el espacio urbano, vivían al lado de las personas libres, participaban en los eventos de la ciudad y estaban presentes en todos los espacios de intercambio y circulación de ideas, informaciones y noticias. (Giolitto 69)

The interracial interactions and exchanges emerging from the rise of the free black population had profound social ramifications that contributed to the breakdown of the traditional colonial hierarchy that was once rigidly built upon race, class, and religion.

Sierva María’s life can be characterized by the “insider-outsider” experience of limbo because her kinship and her body are constantly in a state of negotiation: is Sierva María the vexing metaphorical *mulata*, a black person with white skin? This question proves to be significant upon evaluating her orphanhood. If Sierva María were in fact a black person concealed by whiteness (think Ellison’s white-washed “chunka coal”), then her orphanhood can be attributed to the fact that she is a daughter of Africa, and Africa is the mother of an orphaned people. Originally orphaned by her parents at birth, Sierva María is unexpectedly catapulted into a state of orphanhood yet again when her father abandons her in the name of disease and leaves her in the hands of white authority at the convent of Santa Clara. As the community’s moral compass, the convent of Santa Clara symbolizes an institution of patriarchy that regulates social transgressions by distinguishing the abject from the acceptable.

In spite of the abject label she is assigned upon arriving at the convent as a young girl, Sierva María manages to turn Santa Clara upside down, inspiring sinful desire to arise in the pure Christian conscience of Father Delaura and making freedom accessible to her murderous convent mate, Martina Laborde. As a source of danger, Sierva María’s
invisibility allows her to penetrate the sacred space of Delaura’s dreams, contaminating his Christian values with demonic images of the erotic:

Desde el fondo del sueño oyó los tres nocturnos de los maitines del nuevo día en el santuario vecino. <<Dios te salve María de Todos los Ángeles>>, dijo dormido. Su propia voz lo despertó de pronto, y vio a Sierva María con la bata de reclusa y la caballera a fuego vivo sobre los hombros, que tiró el clavel viejo y puso un ramo de gardenias recién nacidas en el florero del mesón. Delaura, con Garcilaso, le dijo de voz ardiente: <<Por vos nací por vos tengo la vida, por vos he de morir y por vos muero>>. Sierva María sonrió sin mirarlo. El cerró los ojos para estar seguro de que no era un engaño de las sombras. La visión se había desvanecido cuando los abrió, pero la biblioteca estaba saturada por el rastro de sus gardenias. (García Márquez 119)

Interestingly enough, Delaura’s dream is further polluted by the pagan poetry of his distant relative Garcilaso, who inspires Delaura to abandon his Christian duties and submit to the demon that is love.

Sierva María continues to chip away at the convent’s crumbling foundation by assisting in Martina’s great escape. From the Basque region of Spain, Martina Laborde epitomizes another contaminated white body. As Martina’s mischievous partner in crime, Sierva María Africanizes Martina’s flight when the convent authorities question Martina’s absence and Sierva María’s involvement. She explains that Martina’s escape was facilitated by six creatures that had the wings of a bat: “<<Tenían alas de murciélago>> …<<Las abrieron en la terraza, y se la llevaron volando, volando, hasta el otro lado del mar>>” (García Márquez 192). This is the famous myth of return by flight

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44 Situated in the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France, Basque Country is infamous for its distinct non-indoeuropean language and the mysterious origins of its ethnically indecipherable population. Historically, Basque society existed in opposition to neighboring societies because it permitted women to hold positions of power in a region that was dominated by patriarchy (Bullen 118). Further marginalizing the Basque people from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula were the cultural customs associated with paganism and herbal medicine. During the 17th century, the Spanish Inquisition set up the Basque witch trials (Bullen 152). Laborde, Martina’s surname, serves as a marker of her Basque identity, for Labourd is the name of a traditional Basque province where a massive witch-hunt was held in 1609 (Burns 168).
that appears throughout the African diaspora in the Americas. By Africanizing the reality of Martina’s escape, Sierva María creates a black reality that signifies on the myth of the flying Africans and the death of Mackandal in El reino de este mundo. In all three cases, Africa symbolizes the desired destination on “la otra orilla” and undermines the white, Christian notions of afterlife.

As the opening and closing subject of the novel, Sierva María’s hair transcends her grave and becomes an unforgettable relic that witnesses Latin America’s profound impurity. Upon arriving at the convent of Santa Clara, Sierva María’s hair is immediately questioned and stigmatized by the gatekeeper:

La trenza mal prendida se desenrolló casi hasta el piso. La tornera no creyó que fuera natural. El marqués trató de enrollarla. La niña lo apartó, y se la arregló sin ayuda con una habilidad que sorprendió a la tornera.

<<Hay que cortársela>>, dijo.
<<Es una manda a la Santísima Virgen hasta el día que se case>>, dijo el marqués. (García Márquez 83)

As is made apparent in this conversation, Sierva María’s hair is immediately recognized as taboo. Historically regarded as the root of female power, long, flowing hair is a symbol of danger that threatens male power and challenges the male phallus, thus marking Sierva María as a phallic female. According to Freud, Medusa’s decapitated head serves as a metaphor for castration and evokes the terror that is associated with a male’s first glimpse at a female’s penis-less genitalia, ultimately contributing to the monsterization of the female (212). As demonstrated by the myth of Medusa, hair is an uncontrollable and uncontainable facet of female danger that can stiffen a man and disrupt society. García Márquez riffs on the Greek myth of Medusa by gracefully applying it to his own

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45 In his poem “Un sueño” (1836-1838), Juan Francisco Manzano describes a dream of flight in which he is bequeathed with precious, painted wings that facilitate his escape from Cuba’s slave shackles to the shores of Africa.
protagonist as she is transformed from the possessed into the possessor: “La caballera de
Sierva María se encrespó con vida propia como las serpientes de la Medusa, y de la boca
salió una baba de verde y un sartal de improperios en lenguas de idólatras” (García
Márquez 158). Sierva María’s flowing mane, as a visibly phallic attribute, converts her
character into a phallic female.

As Julia Kristeva explains in the _Power of Horror_,

the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the
no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed […] That other sex, the
feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.
(Kristeva 70)

Historically mis/understood as God’s representation of the abject, the inferior and
mutilated female body operates in opposition to the superior male body, and thus
symbolizes the embodiment of male castration. This Freudian interpretation brings up
the notions of dismemberment and disability that are inherent in the discourse of
castration. Speaking explicitly to the transformation of the female body into a site of
violence and violation, feminist disability theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains
the following in her compelling text, _Extraordinary Bodies:_

Not only has the female body been labeled deviant, but historically the practices
of femininity have configured female bodies similarly to disability. Foot binding,
scarification, clitoridectomy, and corseting were (and are) socially accepted,
couraged, even compulsory cultural forms of female disablement that,
ironically, are socially enabling, increasing a woman’s value and status at a given
moment in particular society. (27)

In the case of Sierva María, the cutting of her hair proves to be a form a female
dismemberment that is socially disabling rather than enabling. As a relic of her virginity
and nobility, Sierva María’s hair is her only remaining attachment to the father that
abandoned her at the gates of Santa Clara. Because of the stigmatized link that
Catholicism draws between long hair and sexual promiscuity, however, Sierva María’s head is violently shaved as the Bishop attempts to exorcise the rabid demons that supposedly afflict her. By violating Sierva María’s straitjacketed body in such a way, the Bishop imposes white order and restores his own patriarchal power in the name of the Church. Thus, the shaving of Sierva María’s head signifies on the institution of slavery, which calls for the shaving of the captive head in order to humiliate and denote a state of servitude. In conclusion, Sierva María’s shaved head symbolizes her genealogical dismemberment as well as her socially disabling demotion from the daughter of nobility to the convent’s castrated captive.

As an act that coincides with Édouard Glissant’s notion of the “compulsion of transparency,” that is, the “production of colonial subjects through knowledge of their bodies” (De Ferrari 11), the shaving of Sierva María’s head violently reduces her to a body, while ironically emphasizing her racial and sexual ambiguity (“opacity”). Defined as “the otherness that resulted from colonization,” Glissant’s concept of a “right to opacity” describes the “right to difference without exclusion” (De Ferrari 11). Sierva María is denied her “right to opacity” and forced to submit to the violent “compulsion of transparency” that is exercised against her at the convent of Santa Clara. According to De Ferrari, bodies that are volatile and vulnerable such as

the woman, the nonwhite, the ill, the abject—bodies, in short, whose identities do not recuperate in their overwhelming materiality an original harmony with self and world […] are relegated in their corporeal overdetermination to the status of nonpersons, partial subjects. (11)

Because “the Other…is always her body” (De Ferrari 11), Sierva María’s “corporeal overdetermination” is complicated by her ambiguity or metaphorical mulatez, which is rooted precisely in her supposed contraction of rabies. Since first rumored to have
contracted rabies, Sierva María’s body is not only conflated with racial markers and cultural stereotypes; it is also determined abject—a body that has been destroyed beyond repair: “<<Por fortuna>>, concluyó, <<aunque el cuerpo de la niña sea irrecoverable, Dios nos ha dado los medios de salvar su alma>>” (79). Although the authorities read her body as incurable or irrecoverable, Sierva María redresses her body and recuperates her *mulatez* in the company of black slaves until patriarchy ultimately solidifies her dismemberment and instigates her violent death in their attempt to save her soul.

As a metaphorical *mulata*, Sierva María embodies a collection of contradictions that pull at the strings of socially constructed binaries. Her whiteness is compromised by her upbringing in the slave quarters, her presumed contraction of rabies, and her double dismemberment. Unanchored in gender, her sexuality is complicated by her early consecration to the sexually ambiguous *orisha*, Olokun and her latter castration at the convent of Santa Clara. Sierva María’s sanctification to Olokun, *orisha* of the ocean, serves as a key element of her metaphorical mulatez and her experience in limbo. As the ultimate symbol of limbo in slave history, the ocean accommodates the Middle Passage, the point of departure that Hortense Spillers’ uses for discussing the de-gendering of African peoples:

Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic,’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all […] Under these conditions, one is neither female nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as quantities. (72)

In response to this de-gendering, Hortense Spillers suggests that re-“‘gendering’ takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its
tentacles for male and female subjects over a wider ground of human and social purposes” (72). In Sierva María’s case, however, the domestic is made inaccessible by her dislocation to the slave quarters. By configuring Sierva María’s body within the terms used to configure that of a slave, one can conclude that Sierva María is unanchored in gender much like her Jewish double, Abrenuncio.

Because of the metaphorical nature of Sierva María’s mulatez, I have refrained from evaluating her character through the essentialist lens of the tragic mulatto. Instead, I analyze her mulatez in terms of a limbo that is defined by her racial and sexual ambiguity, which contribute to “the vulnerability of the body [that] becomes a condition of possibility of emancipation from colonialism at the cultural and social levels” (De Ferrari 11). In spite of her tragic demise, Sierva María’s death can be read as a mythical escape marking her emancipation and rebirth, both of which are articulated by the long locks of copper hair spilling out of her crypt nearly two hundred years later.

What then provoked García Márquez to construct Sierva María’s character in such a complicated fashion? This question leads me to assess Sierva María as a metaphor for the Caribbean’s profound ambiguities. Through Sierva María’s metaphorical mulatez, García Márquez acknowledges the profound racial impurities of Cartagena, a city that proves to be emblematic of greater Latin America and the Caribbean. Much in the spirit of what historian George Reid Andrews calls the “cultural browning,” García Márquez uses the model of mulatez to expose that which was previously repressed and embrace it as the “essence of being Latin American” (153).
Son de Almendra

In her suspenseful and thrilling historical fiction, *Son de Almendra* (2005), Cuban-born Mayra Montero offers a fictional reconstruction of memory (Cámara 17) in an effort to revisit the island that she and her family left behind in the 1960’s, following the Cuban Revolution. Cuban writer and journalist Jaime Sarusky has suggested that Montero’s work symbolizes an exercise in nostalgic immersion:

Me atrevería a insinuar que, esta vez, el suyo es un ejercicio a fondo, una inmersión de nostalgia por sus años cubanos. ¿Los 17 primeros? Ha construído con algo tan distante de su adolescencia y de su primera juventud, como eran los asuntos de la mafia, aquel tiempo que quedó grabado con apasionada obstinación en su memoria. (1)

Set predominantly in 1957 Havana, Montero’s novel does not explicitly addresses Fidel Castro’s rise to power or the Revolution’s violent overthrow of the corrupt puppet president turned dictator, Fulgencio Batista in 1959; it does, however, expose the terrorism and political brutality that swept the streets of Havana in the years leading up to these groundbreaking historical events. Montero accesses the 1950’s Cuban imaginary through the Italian-American mafia’s occupation of the island, offering a nostalgic critique of the island’s decadence and degradation. Upon exposing the political corruption of Batista’s dictatorship and the culture of consumption driving the mafia’s colonization of Havana’s hotels, casinos, nightclubs, and women, Montero reappropriates significant historical details that underscore the raw realism and gruesome aesthetic of her intricate narrative.

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46 Mayra Montero was born in Havana, Cuba in 1952. The daughter of a successful comedy writer/actor whose career was split between Cuba and Puerto Rico, Montero has spent most of her life in Puerto Rico since she moved there as a child in the mid-1960s. She studied journalism in Mexico and Puerto Rico and started her literary career as a highly acclaimed journalist (Foster 251).
Montero’s work weaves together the lives and narrative perspectives of the young white journalist, Joaquín Porrata and the mulata circus performer turned cabaret assistant, Yolanda (Fantina), producing an unexpected duet of brutal realism and magical realism that juxtaposes the Caribbean’s competing realities. At the center of both realities rests the novel’s only invincible character: violence. Throughout the text, violence maintains omnipresence, asserting tyrannical control over its perpetrators and victims by mutilating bodies and destroying bloodlines. Havana is converted into a battlefield, a demented paradise that is populated by reckless politicians, ruthless mobsters, and ghosts of a traumatic past. Although critics and publishers characterize Montero’s text as a mafia thriller, this work transcends the boundaries of its genre by fleshing out the profoundly Caribbean themes of orphanhood, dismemberment, and limbo that are operating at its core. I will look at the disintegration of the nuclear family through the tropes of violence and dismemberment in order to trace the roots of redress back to the adoptive community in the following chapter.

As a callow journalist for the entertainment section of Havana’s Diario de la Marina, Joaquín accidentally falls into a high-risk mafia investigation that transcends the tame nature of his typical artist interviews. When Joaquín is assigned to the mysterious escape and subsequent death of a captive hippopotamus at the Zoológico de La Habana, he discovers a fateful mafia message that is subliminally embedded in the crime. Upon meeting the zoo attendant, Juan Bulgado, Joaquin learns that the hippo’s death was in fact

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47 According to Sarusky, “Aquí están involucrados, directa o indirectamente, la familia cubana y el machismo, donde coinciden, en una encrucijada en el tiempo, la lucha clandestina de los rebeldes en las ciudades y en las montañas, enfrentados a la represión batistiana, la misma policía y los mismos políticos que le abrieran las puertas a esa mafia y la protegían” (2).

48 Joaquin eventually leaves his post at the Diario de la Marina and moves to the Prensa Libre in order to pursue his mafia investigation in a more aggressive fashion.
a message for the infamous Italian-American mob-boss, Umberto Anastasia, who was assassinated on the very same day in New York City’s Park Sheraton barbershop.\footnote{Born in 1902 Umberto (Albert) Anastasia was a founder of the \textit{Cosa Nostra} or American Mafia. Throughout the late 1930’s and early 1940’s, Anastasia ran the Jewish-Italian hit squad, Murder, Inc. (also known as the “The Brownsville Boys”) and eventually headed the Gambino crime family for most of the 1950’s, until he was assassinated in the barbershop of the Park Sheraton Hotel on Oct. 25, 1957 (Raab 68, 114). Historical accuracy is retained throughout the novel’s allusions to the mob boss and his assassination.}

Mesmerized by mob culture since his first childhood encounter with powerful figureheads such as Meyer Lansky and Umberto Anastasia, Joaquín continues to pursue the dangerous story he discovers at the zoo, following the storyline through the cabarets and casinos of Havana, all the way to the notorious Apalachin Meeting of New York.\footnote{During the 1950’s, the powerful Jewish mobster, Meyer Lansky controlled all of Cuba’s gambling casinos. When Anastasia demanded a larger share of the casinos that were under Lansky’s control, Lansky refused, consequently forcing Anastasia to start his own casino project on the island (English 189).}

When a tip from Bulgado converges with a \textit{Diario} assignment at the Sans Souci cabaret, Joaquín meets the sensuous \textit{mulata manca}, Yolanda.\footnote{Upon receiving this tip from Bulgado, Joaquín realizes that his wife, Elvira, is mentally disabled: “era gorda y risueña, una rubia en la treintena, con espejuelos de mucho aumento, zapatos ortopédicos y grandes tetas sin ilusión; todos los elementos de una discreta retardada” (37). I am intrigued by the competing images of disability (physical and mental) that Montero offers in her novel.}

In spite of her corporeal disfigurement, Yolanda becomes an eroticized mother figure for Joaquín, who is in search of familial stability and companionship. As an endangered journalist looking for the security and support missing from his own family’s home, Joaquín seeks refuge in Yolanda and quickly develops a sexual relationship with the woman nearly thirteen years his senior. Joaquín’s affinity for older women is not surprising, given the uncomfortable, if not problematic relationship that he has with his mother, whom he describes as awkward and shrill: “desgarbada, fumadora, tensa, con una voz que era como un cristal histérico, y el pelo totalmente blanco” (8). Historically attracted to older women, Joaquín recalls falling in love with his best friend’s mother, Aurora (Meyer Lansky’s Cuban mistress), at a very young age. Although Yolanda is
unable to mother her own son, she serves as a sexualized surrogate mother for Joaquin and continues to nurture a genealogy that is fraught with missing limbs, entangled blood lines, and unsettling silences.

Over the course of the novel, Yolanda’s personal narrative unravels through isolated and italicized chapters that dismember her memory from the plot’s central drama, offering a counternarrative that proves to be as captivating and compelling as Joaquin’s mafia misadventures. Taking on the form of personal soliloquies, Yolanda’s chapters give a voice to the violent and traumatic memories that she recuperates through a relationship with her troubled young lover. It is here that the reader learns about Yolanda’s familial and physical dismemberment, both of which occur within the context of the circus. Playing the routine role of the woman that quite literally gets sawed in half during the blade box illusion, Yolanda is forced to undergo amputation after her performance partner, Sindhi, accidentally cuts through her arm. Although Yolanda’s arm is initially salvaged, infection brews in the sixteen-year-old mother of one, threatening her life and forcing her to remove the arm entirely. Yolanda’s physical dismemberment is no doubt a symbolic tribute to her genealogical dismemberment. Orphaned by her mother, Yolanda’s body is marked by the violence of dismemberment, while her psyche is marked by the trauma of it.

Although Yolanda’s narrative is not textually incorporated into the novel’s plot, it is interwoven and centered as a narrative of its own. According to Thomson,

Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance. (Thomson 9)
In contrast to Thomson’s observation, Montero breaks from tradition by drawing Yolanda out of the margins and giving her the agency to voice herstory. Yolanda’s dismembered narrative brings to light the “ever shifting, unstable relationship between body and non-body, between dis-membering and re-membering” (Dash “In Search of the Lost Body” 20) and proves that her memory, unlike her body, remains very much intact.

Because it is difficult to conceive of a voice without a body, Montero positions Yolanda’s body at the forefront of her work in order to accompany the displaced voice (herstory) that fragments the novel’s central plot. In doing so, Montero draws attention to the fact that Yolanda’s body is a recovering site of violence that defies the social implications and limitations of disability. Thomson recasts disability in terms of ethnicity in an effort to counteract its traditional understanding as a form of pathology. In her work, Thomson shows that “disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions” (6). I use Thomson’s framework here as a vehicle for entering the often stigmatized conversation about explicit physical differences.

While considering the socially contextualized views of corporeal difference reflected in Montero’s novel, I interpret Yolanda’s battered body as a rhetorical device that buttresses the preexisting traits of otherness that queer her character. To be clear, I am not using the term queer as a reference to sexual identity; instead I am using it as a marker of illegibility that is rooted in the unconventional differences transcending one’s race, class, and gender. That is not to say that those three constructions of otherness are not at play here. In fact, Yolanda’s mulataz, coupled with her femininity and shifting

52 At this point I am referring to the adoptive community that substitutes for her nonexistent nuclear family, her broken body, and her unusual love affairs.
position in the entertainment industry are precisely the foundation, if not the very reason for her corporeal eccentricities. As a character in limbo, Yolanda embodies a collection of contradictions that surpass the basic binaries embedded in the constructs of race and gender, for example. For that reason, I refer to Thomson’s interpretation of the disabled woman as

a cultural third term, defined by the original pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman. (Thomson 29)

I borrow Thomson’s model of the “cultural third term” to capture the essence of limbo that is articulated through the multiplicity of differences imprinted on Yolanda’s body. The corporeal contradictions of Yolanda’s character intersect on her body’s surface for she is a broken but beautiful *mulata*, inspiring the male gaze and the curious stare simultaneously. In spite of her missing limb, Yolanda remains a desired and desiring subject. In fact, her body is eroticized and freed from what Harlan Hahn has termed, “asesexual objectification”—that is, “The assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people” (Thomson 25). Upon meeting Yolanda for the first time, Joaquín is surprised by her missing limb, but instantly attracted to her nonetheless:

Mientras apretaba esos deditos, caí en la cuenta de que le faltaba el otro brazo o buena parte de él. Vi la manga recogida a la altura de del codo y comprendí: no había mano ni antebrazo ni codo, ¿qué diablos era? Yo estaba hipnotizado y le miré el esconte para hipnotizarme más. (44)

Hypnotized by her appearance and the mystery behind her bodily void, Joaquin becomes a “devotee” practicing devoteeism—the “heterosexual desire that issues from staring at the disabled body, [which] is almost universally considered to be pathological” (Thomson “Dares to Stares” 34). Yolanda mothers and others Joaquin, whose heterosexual desire is
transformed from “normative” to pathological as he continues to exercise his gaze in Yolanda’s presence and fantasize her Venus-like body in her absence: “Traté de imaginármela desnuda, sin su brazo izquierdo. Me pregunté si no hubiera sido preferable que le faltara, por ejemplo, un pie” (52). By contemplating the loss of her other less obvious limbs as a substitute for the absence of Yolanda’s hypervisible arm, Joaquín engages in a discourse of perception that is tied to the trope of in/visibility. Joaquín’s concern with perception reveals his apprehension about being seen with a *manca* as well as his anxiety about embracing one: “Nunca había abrazado un cuerpo desparejo, ni tampoco había sido abrazado por alguien que lo hiciera a la mitad” (47).

For Joaquín, these anxiety-ridden preoccupations are resolved when he attempts to normalize his relationship with Yolanda through a pop cultural reference from his childhood:

> Cabía la posibilidad de que la gente se volviera para mirarla: Yolanda llamaba la atención, era algo así como la novia de Tamakún, el Vengador Errante, un personaje de mi niñez, aventurero de serial de radio que llevaba turbante, bigotico, y sable. La novia era esclava circasiana a la que describían con la piel oscura, los ojos claros y el lunar en la frente. (54)

I find it particularly intriguing that Joaquín is reminded of a pair of Oriental radionovela characters.53 The Orientalism, paired with an allusion to slavery, exoticizes Yolanda while simultaneously normalizing her. The description depicts heroic heterosexual desire coupled with a heteronormative romance that allows Joaquín to construct a normalized fantasy around his pathological devoteecism and Yolanda’s corporeal transgression. As Joaquín’s sexual relationship with Yolanda evolves into a respectable romance, he

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53 Popularized in the early 1940’s, “Tamakún el vengador errante” was a Cuban radionovela written by the Cuban writer, Armando Cuoto. Tamakún, the protagonist of the series, was an orphaned Hindu prince whose parents were killed by his villainous uncle, Sakiri el Negro during his takeover of the family kingdom. The radionovela depicted Tamakún’s heroic adventures as he regains kingdom control from his evil uncle and fights crime around the world. (Castellanos 102)
becomes more aware of his own physical and emotional vulnerability as well as the growing respect and pity-less desire he has for Yolanda: “Empezaba un amor peligroso, lo supe porque no sentía por ella ni un poquito de lástima, no había piedad en mi forma de querer abrigarla, en mi pasión por retenerla” (70).

I would like to note that Joaquín is not the only character concerned with perception. In her chapter entitled, “Oh, vida,” Yolanda, very much aware of her bodily difference, describes the intricate process of perception that unfolds in those who try to make sense of her othered body:

Creo que me vio llegar, no se dio cuenta de que me faltaba el brazo, eso le pasa a mucha gente, están tan acostumbrados a que los demás tengan dos brazos, que un primer momento, la mente le engaña, no se dan cuenta de que me falta algo, y no es hasta que pasa un rato, cuando me pongo de pie o cambio de postura, que descubren que tengo un muñón, un taquito de carne que no me cubro porque no me da la gana, porque me parece que es la traición más grande que le puedo hacer, no sólo a ese buen brazo que está enterrado en un lugar que únicamente tú conoces, en este mismo cementerio, sino también a mis recuerdos, a la mujer serruchada que fui por tantos años… (240)

In this soliloquy directed at the late Chinita, Yolanda reflects upon the reaction that her disability, a bodily performance in itself, inspires in those around her. While contemplating the initial unawareness and latter sense of surprise or deception that she observes in onlookers, Yolanda’s monologue indirectly addresses the constant tension that exists between the broken body’s invisibility and hypervisibility. Yolanda contributes to this tension by refusing to betray her body or the memory of its loss by attempting to “pass” as a full-bodied person. In other words, Yolanda uses the performance of disability rather than the performance of “passing” to blur the fine line separating her missing arm’s invisibility and its hypervisibility. By drawing the mixed attention of the male gaze and the curious stare, Yolanda inadvertently acquires a sense
of performativity that complements her history as a circus performer while highlighting her ability to perform the roles that emphasize the irony of her being a disabled, able-body. Although she is currently working as an artist’s assistant backstage rather than as a circus performer on stage, Yolanda performs her own disability by demonstrating the functionality of her broken body.\textsuperscript{54}

In their text, \textit{Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance}, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander think through disability and corporeal differences not in terms of what one \textit{is}, but in terms of what one \textit{does} (10). Sandahl and Auslander reconsider disability as a performance, bearing in mind the “performance of everyday life” put forth by Erving Goffman and the notion of “performativity” developed by Judith Butler. Like gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity, disability is “not a static ‘fact’ of the body” (Sandahl and Auslander 2); it is, however, “a way of interacting with a world that is frequently inhospitable” (10). By considering the ways in which Sandahl and Auslander reexamine the performative aspects of difference inscribed on the body, I can better understand Montero’s reasons for “manipulating and transforming [the] stereotypes” that operate in conjunction with the “available ‘scripts’ of disability—both in daily life and in representation—[that] are frustratingly limited and deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination” (Sandahl and Auslander 3).

Throughout the novel, Montero strategically positions Yolanda’s character in situations that provoke stereotypical reactions from her audience, while subsequently offering a performative act that defies those very reactions. Take for example Joaquín’s

\textsuperscript{54} Yolanda is not the only character performing disability in the novel. Bulgado’s mentally disabled wife performs her disability as well: “Me di cuenta de que [Elvira] lo hacía por mí, un espectáculo dedicado al visitante, trataba de llamar la atención con unos gestos que se correspondían a su edad mental: cinco o seis añitos” (39).
initial hesitation regarding the possibility of engaging in a sexual relationship with Yolanda:

Sentí una felicidad vaga y difícil, me había tomado el riesgo de llamar a una mujer a la que faltaba un brazo, una criatura indescifrable, medio pollito en el sentido estricto de la palabra. No he conocido a un solo manco que no sea violento, violento o necio, la misma cosa” (52).

Although Joaquín’s apprehension refers him to the stereotypes of violence and foolishness often associated with (male) amputees, Yolanda’s sexual prowess and sensual tenderness immediately defy his preliminary and treacherous thought process. Instead, Yolanda performs Cuban femininity by conflating the roles of mother and lover, offering Joaquin a domestic refuge while nurturing him with the sexualized culinary staple of bistec: “Era una novedad. No comerríamos en ninguna parte. Una mujer cubana que se aproxima al sexo preparará bisté” (75). On a separate occasion, Yolanda defies the stereotype of disability by successfully performing her femininity and domesticity yet again:

Sali con los refrescos en una bandeja, ya me había acostumbrado a cogerla con un solo brazo, equilibrando el peso, con la necesidad, se aprenden muchas cosas, pero las niñas me miraban con la boca abierta…ellas se miraban entre sí, nunca habían visto a una manca tan eficiente. (208)

In this case, Yolanda’s body is misconstrued as disabled or dysfunctional even though her body is not only able, but efficient as well.

By repudiating the paradigm of corporeal deviance most often used to pigeonhole disability, Montero reveals the irony of the disabled/able-bodied binary that renders capable bodies defunct. Montero accomplishes this by focusing on the fact that “Although actual impairments usually affect particular body parts or physical functions, one specific difference classifies an entire person ‘disabled’ even though the rest of the
body and its functions remain ‘normal’” (Thomson 34). Therefore, Montero riffs on this irony by locating Yolanda in limbo, an intermediary space marked by the paradoxical void lingering in between the definitive binaries characterizing constructs such as race, gender, and physicality. As a mulata, Yolanda is both black and white; as a manca, she is disabled but capable; as an orphan, she is dismembered from her mother but re-membered to an adoptive community; as a cultural third term, she is not fully female, but she is a desired and desiring subject. In other words, Yolanda is an enigma, a fragmented body of contradictions, just like the Caribbean itself.

Upon considering the enigmatic and illegible nature of Yolanda’s character, I would like to draw attention to her relationship with the homosexual leper, Roderico Neyra (Rodney). A former ballerina and the current king of Cuba’s cabaret culture, Roderico runs Havana’s Tropicana club where he is famous for his exquisite stage productions and crude character. Originally from Cuba’s Oriente region, Roderico is described as an “individuo feo, refeo, mulato grifo, boca de cloaca” (87). Disfigured and mutilated by the leprosy that he contracted from his grandfather, a migrant laborer who was working on the Panama Canal, Roderico symbolizes a host for foreign impurities and contamination. In addition to hosting a foreign strain of leprosy, Roderico engages in his earliest homosexual relationship with his foreign childhood friend—the son of Swedish migrants—Odín.55 I would like to note that the two young boys were first acknowledged as “novios” by another foreign body, the Jamaican cane worker, Brown (142). As Roderico and Odín’s relationship disintegrates with time, Roderico’s jealousy ensues, ultimately driving him to purposely infect Odín’s healthy (foreign) body—“alto, musculoso y rubio” (143)—with leprosy.

55 The name Odín refers to the “chief god” of Nordic mythology (Daly 76).
I draw attention to Roderico’s exposure to foreign bodies because it offers a compelling commentary on corporeal contamination. If we read both leprosy and homosexuality as bodily performances of the abject, then we can better understand Roderico’s reasoning for infecting Odín. As an act of the stereotypical “obsessive avenger,” Roderico “seeks revenge against those he considers responsible for his disablement” (Sandahl and Auslander 3) or defilement. Within this frame, we can read Roderico’s native Cuban body as one that has been corrupted by foreign disease, much like a conquest-inspired metaphor that allows us to read foreign characters as carriers of contamination.

As Julia Kristeva states in the *Power of Horror*, “Chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus locate impurity in leprosy: skin tumor, impairment of the cover that guarantees corporeal integrity, sore on the visible, presentable surface” (101). Because leprosy “visibly affects the skin, the essential if not initial boundary of the biological and psychic individuation” (Kristeva 101), it unleashes a discourse of abjection that renders Roderico’s character grotesque, both inside and out: “la lepra es una enfermedad que no sólo destruye por fuera, sino que también lo hace por dentro” (Montero 146). From Joaquín’s perspective, Roderico “era un tipo soez y arrogante, que hubiera sido feo de cualquier manera, pero la lepra lo había afeado aún más, al punto que me pareció la última persona por la que nadie, hombre o mujer, podría sentirse atraído” (109). In spite of his abject appearance and immoral character, Yolanda observes an intoxicating tenderness in him that attracts her much like the mysterious and legendary *magos* that use their invisible hooks to attract and recruit young women (like her own mother) to the circus. Because Yolanda is aware of the fact that “La gente más inesperada nos causa alguna vez ternura” (90), she accepts
Roderico in spite of his character flaws, physical abjection, and the risk of corporeal contamination that he presents. In fact, Yolanda’s acceptance of Roderico is translated into a mutual attraction for the “other” that ultimately defines their relationship:

me di cuenta de que nos habíamos quedado conectados, enganchados en un plano que no era del espíritu, ni del alma, ni de ninguna de esas boberías, sino enganchados por la carne, por la miseria, por el lenguaje que sólo conoce un cuerpo herido. (89)

As victims of corporeal betrayal, both Roderico and Yolanda are able to relate to each other based on their shared experiences of bodily mutilation.

I would like to point out that Yolanda and Roderico’s queer relationship demonstrates a mutually flawed desire for a body that is defined by difference. Roderico’s diseased homosexual body neutralizes the stigma of Yolanda’s fragmented body, almost normalizing it to an extent. Evoking the paradigm of “the beauty and the beast,” their relationship establishes Roderico as his own cultural third term—a decaying male body that is emasculated by homosexuality and challenged by Yolanda’s heterosexual desire. As a third term, Roderico is positioned in limbo, much like “The Bakhtinian carnivalesque figure [who] frequently appears in critical analyses of the grotesque as a liminal aesthetic category that enables radical representations by straddling and transgressing categories” (Thomson Extraordinary Bodies 38).56 Engaging in an intimate but chaste relationship with Yolanda, Roderico ultimately transgresses his own transgression, leaving Yolanda humiliated and heartbroken after rejecting her spontaneous marriage proposal in Las Vegas. Curiously, Yolanda describes her heartbreak in terms of the phantom limb, suggesting that her relationship with Roderico

56 Bahktin’s representation of the disfigured body as “the right to be other in this world” and a “challenge to the existing order” is particularly interesting given the fact that he was an amputee (Thomson 38). Disabled by a bone disease, his leg was amputated in 1938, at the age of twenty-eight (Thomson 150).
represents another violent blow to her body, another amputated piece of her past: “me acordaba del que habíamos hecho, tal como me acordaba del brazo que me habían cortado, así, con esa sensación de haber perdido algo que era mi carne y hueso” (149). Alas, Yolanda remains the rhetorical reminder that every body is a vulnerable body.

Yolanda’s broken heart, much like her fragmented body, speaks to the consistent splitting of self that is repeated throughout the novel. Originally named Fantina by her biological mother, Yolanda rejects the name after amputating her arm and admits, “Nunca me gustó Fantina. Es un nombre que suena a fantasma, y me da miedo el fantasma que veo en mí, dedicada a contar siempre la misma historia: un mago que entra en una casa con cualquier pretexto, lanza al aire su anzuelo invisible y pesca el corazón de una mujer” (207). A name of French origin meaning “childlike,” Fantina is referred to in Yolanda’s narrative as the ghost of her own history, the innocent alter ego that was buried with her arm when she was sixteen years old. By acknowledging two identities that exist on a continuum fragmented by dismemberment, Yolanda recognizes Fantina as a disembodied subject that haunts her present and personifies her past. According to Vera M. Kutzinski,

Disembodied subjects, usually unbeknownst to themselves, are phantoms. Put differently, phantom bodies are the physical shapes of individuals who, in keeping with the ingrained dualities to which they subscribe, believe their material existence to be utterly insignificant, of no consequence to their awareness and their thinking. (Kutzinski 144)

As Joaquín gradually evolves into a beat reporter, he becomes better acquainted with his split self and a split Havana that he had not previously acknowledged:

Era algo así como poner en marcha una doble vida. Mi hermano Santiago solía decir que todo el mundo, hasta las monjitas de clausura, llevaba una vida doble. Y aquella noche me puse a pensar que el país también la llevaba, que la ciudad tenía una cara imaginaria, que era más o menos la cara de todos los días…y otra cara
oculta que era la de los desembarcos, las transmisiones secretas, las bombas caseras y los cadáveres que amanecían desfigurados en las aceras. (133)

Simultaneously post-colonial and pre-revolutionary, Havana exists in limbo, stuck between the pillars of antiquity and the constructs of modernity. This limbo contributes to the city’s profound plurality and unsettling duplicity, both of which speak to its split subjectivity and the trope of leading a double life. A city that smuggles corpses through the streets and guards secrets in its shadows, Havana becomes a disfigured representation of Joaquín’s home place that is transferred and inscribed on to his home space. In other words, the mutilation and corporeal pollution of Havana’s urban landscape resonate with the familial dysfunction of the Porrata household, while foreshadowing the dismemberment of Joaquín’s nuclear family.

Although Joaquín uses the allegory of a “doble vida” to describe the unexpected plot twists of his young adulthood, the reference runs deeper, mapping itself on to a life that is split between competing family models: the nuclear family and the Mafia family. The first model refers to Joaquín’s heteronuclear family, which includes his detached father and tense mother, as well as his secretive older brother, Santiago and his queer younger sister, Lucy. Although the nuclear family is intact, there is an emotional current pulling the family apart, rather than drawing it closer together. The second model, the Mafia family, takes on the form of a homosocial network that operates according to a masculinist code. Valuing bloodshed over bloodlines, the mafia family is built, not born. It personifies an assemblage of gangsters who use violence and terror to manipulate institutions of power in order to transfer control from one man to another. In essence, the mafia is the embodiment of the abject, which Kristeva defines as:
perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life—a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death…it curbs other’s suffering for its own profit…it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss. (Kristeva 15)

Montero exposes the mafia’s complete disregard for human life, explicitly (and quite literally) depicting the “eye for an eye” principle that drives the Cosa Nostra machine. In spite of the model type, both families end up mutilated and dismembered.

I believe that Joaquín is caught in limbo between these two familial constructs because of the trauma that he experiences through the disintegration of the domestic. As we learn early on in the novel, Joaquín’s father leads a double life, much like his three children, spending most of his time split between his work and his lover, Lidia. Upon meeting Lidia for the first time, Joaquín recalls feeling sorry for his mother and well aware of the family’s tragic fate that is foreshadowed by his father’s voluntary dismemberment from the family: “Lo sentía mucho por mi madre, pero el futuro de la familia era la desbandada” (51). In spite of the affair he maintained on the side, Joaquín’s father preserved an attachment to his family through a sacred bond with his eldest son, Santiago: “mi padre dependía totalmente de la opinión de su hijo, confiaba en Santiago como creo que jamás llegó a confiar en ninguna otra persona. Le contaba su vida, eran cómplices idénticos y se divertían cuando estaban juntos” (42).

Following in his father’s footsteps, Santiago leads a double life as well. Spending most of his time outside of the house, Santiago was secretly participating in the revolutionary movement, “el 26 de Julio,” under the guise of having an intense social life. Santiago’s double life as a conspirator against the government proves to be deadly, as he

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57 Joaquin’s father dismembers himself from the Porrata family (metaphorically and literally) by having an affair with Lidia and by committing suicide after Santiago’s death.
is tortured and left for dead by the SIM, Batista’s violent military intelligence service.\textsuperscript{58} As his father’s prize child and favorite son—“su fiel espejo” (36), Santiago personifies the secrets and silences of a repressed family and an oppressed society.\textsuperscript{59} Like Ferré’s portrayal of Puerto Rico in \textit{La casa de la laguna}, Montero depicts the hostility of Cuba’s political landscape, drawing attention to the terrorism that is shamelessly exercised against Havana’s youth. Once again, political violence is unconstrained, spreading from the city space of Havana to the home place of the Porrata household. In other words, the “‘home’ and family become sites for the reproduction of state violence, episodes in which the enforcement of political power is privatized into the realm of the family and thus rendered natural ‘private,’ or invisible” (Wesling 649). The public domain manages to recover, but the private sphere never recuperates its loss.

Maintaining a ghost-like existence over the course of his abridged life, Santiago’s elusive character is not fully articulated until his death. As a living character, Santiago maintained an absence, but as a ghost, he maintains a presence: “No creo en fantasmas, pero tuve la sensación de que Santiago gritaba para que lo oyéramos, y sobre todo, para señalar sus cosas: a la hora en que de verdad teníamos que irse, le daban ganas de quedarse” (199). Joaquín’s visceral interpretation of his tragic loss hones in on the paradoxical but simultaneous feelings of one’s presence and absence, which resonates with the corporeal phenomenon of the phantom limb. In her discussion of the volatile body, Elizabeth Grosz explores the sentience of the phantom limb through a psychoanalytical framework that

\textsuperscript{58} In “\textit{Son de Almendra: juego y poder bajo un apacible danzón},” Raquel Romeu discusses the historical accuracy of Santiago’s assassination and offers details surrounding the actual assassination upon which it was based.

\textsuperscript{59} The tragic irony of Santiago’s death rests in the violence of silence. Santiago’s father never warned him about the political dangers and deadly consequences of the movement. Instead, his father questioned and warned Joaquín, demonstrating his own refusal to consider Santiago as a vulnerable body, an eventual victim of political peril.
addresses the relationship between mind and body. Scientifically speaking, the *phantom limb*—a term coined by Civil War physician, Weir Mitchell—is used to describe the sensations of pain that are experienced at the site previously occupied by the amputated limb (Grosz 41). Following the removal of a “diseased limb,” the “absence of [that] limb is as psychically invested as its presence” (41). Applying this explanation to my own literary analysis, I would suggest that Santiago personifies a limb that has been amputated from two separate, living organisms: Cuba’s social body and the Porrata family tree. Although Santiago was neither a diseased nor abject member of society, his ideologies were contaminated and infected by his covert, revolutionary activity. From the state’s perspective, Santiago represented a diseased limb, a form of political pollution that needed to be dismembered from the greater social body. In psychoanalytical terms, Santiago’s posthumous presence allegorizes a phantom limb, “a kind of libidinal memorial” or “nostalgic tribute” (Grosz 41).

As Santiago’s double, constantly mistaken for his brother upon entering the house and always wearing his hand-me-down clothes, Joaquin experiences his brother’s death as an anxiety-ridden detachment from his former self:

> En ese punto había empezado el miedo, que se volvió insoportable cuando levantaron la sábana y reconocí el cadáver, más insoportable todavía cuando me acosté con Fantina, fantasma del pasado; desde ese instante yo tenía un pasado porque todo era nuevo, para bien o para mal, había dejado atrás una manera de ser, de comprender los lugares, o de mirar la vida. (200)

In this excerpt, Joaquin is describing a phantom-like fragmentation that evokes a sentiment of departure in which the split self lays its innocence to rest. This sense of auto-fragmentation or split subjectivity speaks back to the phantom limb and the tension that exists in the limbo between invisibility and hypervisibility, one’s absence and one’s
presence. Santiago’s death catapults Joaquín into a limbo—“No podía decir ni una cosa ni la otra, era un momento de confusión, una niebla parecida a un limbo” (199)—that disrupts the boundary between latent fear and actualized horror. Upon identifying his brother’s disfigured, eye-less corpse, Joaquín states,

me aterraba el ojo. El miedo a quedarme ciego había sido uno de los fantasmas de mi niñez, una manía que había arrastrado desde entonces. En las broncas de muchachos siempre evitaba que me tocaron los ojos, pero en esta bronca desigual no había podido. (151)^60

Through the death of his double, Joaquín’s worst nightmare is realized and his previous paranoia regarding corporeal vulnerability is confirmed: “Esos ojos míos sintieron una soledad tremenda, porque faltaban los del otro, los ojos vivos o muertos de Santiago” (195).

Even before his brother’s tragic death, Joaquín reveals a preoccupation with physical vulnerability that is tied to his family’s instability:

Yo no era más que un desterrado en el Sans Souci, allí y en cualquier parte; malvivía en una casa inventada (la de mis padres) y una ciudad desnuda, que por las noches se iba poblando de cadáveres, cuerpos sin ojos, sin uñas, a menudo sin lengua. (46)

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^60 Over the course of the novel, Montero highlights Joaquín’s ommetaphobia, or fear of the eyes, by punning on the mafia principle, “an eye for an eye.” Unable to escape this fear, Joaquín is constantly confronted by eyes without bodies and bodies without eyes, whether he is examining Aquino’s infamous fish eye soup at Mercado Único or identifying his brother’s corpse at the city morgue. Accustomed to eating fish soup in which the eyes are replaced by black olives, Joaquín is haunted by the abject experience of discovering an actual eye in his soup bowl: “Un ojo se movía en el fondo del plato, un ojo de verdad, no una aceituna. Se me ocurrió que provenía de otro animal, que no era de ningún pescado, fue una iluminación, algo que hubiera querido descatar a solas” (65). Whether a mafia scare tactic or a cannibalistic culinary delicacy, this excerpt bears a striking resemblance to the horrors of slavery described in Gilberto Freyre’s *The Masters and the Slaves:*

There are tales of sinhá-moças [young lady of the house (Archaic word used by the slaves in Brazil)] who had the eyes of pretty mucamas [female slave who used to look after the household] gouged out and then had them served to their husbands for dessert, in a jelly-dish, floating in blood that was still fresh. (351)

Perhaps Montero is signifying on the stunning similarities that exist between the atrocities of slavery and the cruelty of the *Cosa Nostra.*
Describing his family in the terms of “una casa inventada,” Joaquín suggests that the home itself is an imaginary invention rather than a realized refuge. Joaquín identifies himself as an exile, “desterrado” or displaced from his family and dislocated in the abjection of the city. He makes sense of himself and his desecrated surroundings through corporeal imagery and explicit allusions to the battered body. Furthermore, Joaquín locates his own susceptibility to violence in Havana’s helplessness, describing the city as a naked space that is populated by the bodily remnants of death. Once again, the city is conflated with the home, the public and the private converge, and one mutilated place becomes a metaphor for the other.

Joaquín’s thought process in the excerpt above also resonates with Dash’s theory regarding the body as a central and crucial sign in the system of imagery operating at the foundation of Caribbean literature:

The mediation between spirit and flesh, disincarnate subject and incarnate other, conservative denial of the body and its subverse resurrection, is particularly acute in the Caribbean because of the corporeal as well as psychic nature of alienation. (Dash “In Search of the Lost Body” 20)

Furthermore, this excerpt reveals a process of representation that is tied to Joaquín’s deep-seated fear of losing control over his own body. According to Thomson, “Not only can anyone become disabled at any time, but the pain, bodily damage, or impairment sometimes associated with disability make it seem an uncontained threat to those who consider themselves normal” (37). As a “normate,” Joaquín is confronted by this anxiety throughout the course of the novel. As he continues reporting on the covert affairs of the Cosa Nostra in Cuba, Joaquín crosses the fine line between investigating and meddling, which brings him back to his original point of departure, the Havana Zoo. This time, however, Joaquín is not there as an investigative reporter, but rather as a victim of mafia
violence—a battered body in limbo, straddling the border dividing life and death. As punishment for meddling in mafia affairs, Joaquín is ordered to chop up anonymous human carcasses, the remains of which are subsequently fed to the zoo animals: “Sentí los primeros hachazos, cerré los ojos y comprendí que salpicaban cosas, no necesariamente sangre, quizá trocitos de hueso, de cartílago, de piel humana y piel animal” (158). The very nature of this repugnant act exacerbates Joaquín’s hypersensitivity to the threat of bodily mutilation and provokes a psychic process that Grosz explains as follows:

The dissolution or disintegration of the unified body schema risks throwing the subject into the preimaginary real, the domain inhabited by the psychotic. In such a state, the sense of autonomy and agency that accompanies the imaginary and symbolic orders is lost, being replaced by the fantasies of being externally controlled, which are images of fragmentation, and being haunted by part objects derived from earlier, more primitive experiences. (44)

Santiago’s death inspires the complete disintegration of the Porrata family:

“Santiago nos enfermaba a todos, su espíritu o lo que fuera. Era una ironía que un muchacho tan alegre nos atormentara de esa forma después de muerto” (254). The violence and trauma of this tragedy reduce the family members to corpses and ghosts, haunted by their loss and haunting each other. Joaquín describes himself as a ghost surrounded by resurrected zombies, while Lucy emerges from her phantasmal existence as a living replica of her late brother:

un zombi ajeno a lo que me rodeaba; alguien, algún compañero, me saludó al pasar, pero no correspondí al saludo porque los fantasmas no hablan, y yo era un fantasma, había estado entre los muertos, había olido la sangre, la humana mezclada con la de la bestia. (161)

Early on in the novel, Joaquín describes his queer sister Lucy as “una hija marimacha,” and “[el] hijo varón empaquetado en su robusto cuerpo de mujer” (11). Following
Santiago’s death, however, Lucy transforms from an uncomfortable, queer ghost—“parecía una muerta, pálida y con los ojos aguados, no por la comida…sino porque se sentía incómoda dentro de su ropa, y por tener que estar sentada allí, frente a toda la familia” (50)—into the son she always wanted to be:

Lucy había vuelto como hijo pródigo a la casa, nunca mejor dicho, porque su transformación como varón era completa. Al verla, se me pareció un poco a Santiago…Mi madre se había dado por vencida y no mostró ni sopresa ni enojo. Papá sí resintió aquel cambio y se lo noté en la cara, en ese pestañeo repentino que era una forma de alejar fantasmas, porque en el fondo le dolía que Lucy se hubiera convertido en una copia falsa del difunto. (228)

Curiously, Lucy’s queer presence is solidified through Santiago’s absence. From this excerpt, the reader might gather that Lucy is cross-dressing in the ghost of her dead brother. I can’t help but wonder if Montero is repeating and revising the tradition of the queer ghost that is perpetuated in African American Literature. In his essay, “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity,” Robert Reid-Pharr argues that that the homosexual in African American literature is constantly “conflated with the figure of the ghost” (Reid-Pharr 620). By initially depicting a white Cuban lesbian as a ghost that finds her full subjecthood through the death of her masculine role model, Montero seems to be suggesting that there wasn’t enough room in the Porrata family for another son. By replacing the eldest son with a lesbian daughter, Montero queers the composition of the family and makes a motion to rewrite the masculinist codes of patriarchy through transgression, abjection, and loss.

Over the course of the novel, the family that was initially described by Joaquín as a a strange group of disconnected members—“esa extraña mezcla de individuos: no había química, ni pasión, ni estilo. Nada nos unía, nada real quiero decir” (114)—is reduced to
an eclectic arrangement of transgressive individuals: “un hijo muerto, una hija marimacha, y el único varón sobreviviente, enredado con una mulata manca que le llevaba un carajal de años” (199). Although the Porratas were lacking unity to begin with, the decomposition of the nuclear family unit forces the ghostly remains of each member to seek refuge outside of the domestic home space. While Joaquín uses Yolanda as a supportive anchor in the mourning process, his mother exiles herself in the homes of her friends, his sister finds compassion in the arms of her teacher-turned-lover, and his father ultimately seeks solace in suicide.

After their father’s suicide, Joaquín and Lucy move to South Florida with their mother. The novel ends in the United States: Lucy legally marries her teacher/lover in Cambridge after her mother dies and Joaquín marries Leigh, a young American woman that he had previously met with Julian and Yolanda at a New Year’s Eve party several years before. The skeletal remains of this family carcass demonstrate the difficulty for the nuclear family to survive and thrive in an environment as hostile as Havana. Montero portrays the dismembered Caribbean family in conjunction with disfigured bodies in order to reveal their shared vulnerabilities and demonstrate their interchangeability as constantly shifting corporeal signs.

Conclusion

*El reino de este mundo, Del amor y otros demonios,* and *Son de Almendra* use hostile landscapes, racial otherness, and violence to demonstrate the impossibility of a family grammar in the Caribbean. While Carpentier depicts genealogical destruction through the system of slavery and the Haitian Revolution, García Márquez reveals the nuclear family’s downfall through patriarchal violence and the Inquisition’s social
obsession with racial purity in Cartagena de Indias. Finally, Montero depicts the complete and utter decay of the heteronormative family model through the abject brutality and excessive violence of pre-Revolutionary Havana. In doing so, all three novels prove that the family is a difficult construct to cultivate in the Caribbean. Even when two heteronuclear family models are offered as they were in both *Del amor y otros demonios* and *Son de Almendra*, they are ultimately rendered obsolete by racial anxiety, social surveillance, and violence—the living legacy of slavery. Eventually, the family unit decays, much like the body under attack. The environments of revolutionary Haiti, colonial Cartagena, and pre-revolutionary Havana prove to be inhospitable and inhumane, tearing families and their limbs apart.

I find it compelling that both male authors, Carpentier and García Márquez, use white women of color (Paulina Bonaparte and Sierva María, respectively) to approach metaphorical mulatez as the female body performs it. I would suggest that this is rooted in both authors reliance on the trope of invisibility, which essentially speaks back to the Other’s identity being fixed in her body. As Guellermina De Ferrari explains,

*only those bodies that are invisible—that is, those bodies that more seamlessly incarnate the ‘incorporeal nature’ of the thinking subject in the male-centered, European imagination—are capable of reason and can, therefore, fully claim human status. The body that is visible—that is, nonwhite, nonmale, and so on—makes the disengagement of consciousness impossible, for the subject’s experience of the world is seen as irreversibly conditioned by her corporeality.* (De Ferrari 9)

In contrast, Mayra Montero celebrates the corporeal differences imprinted on the othered female body by offering an explicit and non-metaphorical discussion of race and dismemberment. As a third wave feminist text, *Son de Almendra* deploys Yolanda’s body as a rhetorical device that draws attention to her otherness while paying homage to
the violent history of dismemberment that she has endured. In other words, Montero is an author that offers

a version of black female subjectivity that insists upon and celebrates physical difference. By flaunting rather than obscuring these figures’ physical differences, the authors establish the extraordinary body as a site of historical inscription rather than physical deviance, and they simultaneously repudiate such cultural master narratives as normalcy, wholeness, and the feminine ideal. (Thomson *Extraordinary Bodies* 105)

Yolanda’s body is a shifting sign, othered by her relationship with Joaquin and neutralized in her relationship with Roderico. Although a woman of color exemplifies the challenge of having a body versus being a body, Yolanda does not succumb to it. While García Márquez uses the trope of invisibility and appropriates Glissant’s notion of “transparency” and “corporeal overdetermination” in his depiction of Sierva María, Montero defies such traditions by assigning Yolanda, a partial (as in broken) subject, her full subjecthood.

Thinking back now to the Basquiat painting that opened this chapter, it is critical to consider the processes of *rehumanization* that these fragmented literary subjects undergo in order to combat the politics of dehumanization that could potentially compromise their subjecthood. Basquiat’s self-portrait parallels the trials and triumphs of each novel’s characters because his “images do more than connote the destruction of the black body. They also strategize survival and imagine assertions of self in a cultural sphere that is structured to deny visibility to such bodies” (Muñoz 55). In spite of their orphan status and seemingly tragic physical conditions and/or untimely deaths, characters such as Mackandal, Sierva María, and Yolanda—like the split subjects of Basquiat’s *Self-Portrait as a Heel, Part Two*—do not succumb to the trappings of a pathetic existence.

In fact, the characters discussed in this chapter prove that bodily fragmentation is not
necessarily a marker of historical forgetting. On the contrary, such fragmentation signifies the complete opposite and denotes an acute awareness of memory that embodies the individual or collective past. Although Caribbean peoples are often regarded as a history-less peoples, both Mackandal and Yolanda defy that notion and actively exercise their, albeit, one-handed grasp on the past. As Hartman states,

> these traces of memory function in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there. It is a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as a mode of testimony and memory. (Hartman 73)

In the following chapter, I look at how the anti-family machine engineered by the novels in this chapter give birth to what I call adoptive communities, an anti-genealogical redress that rehabilitates the dismembered body.
In her 1943 self-portrait entitled Raíces (Roots), Frida Kahlo confronts the plight of the mother without child and captures the traumatic reality of infertility. At the center of this piece rests Kahlo’s ruptured body, which births an intricate series of vines, stemming from her gaped midsection. Blood appears to be running through the veins of the vines, spilling into the crevices of the dry, barren earth beneath her. Transcending the arteries of the plant, these free flowing bloodlines are a source of nourishment for the earth’s parched surface, much like a wet nurse is to a suckling infant. In fact, Khalo’s biographer Hayden Herrera argues: “Roots is like a reversal of (or counterpart to) My
Nurse and I. In the 1937 painting, Frida was an infant suckling at an earth mother’s plant-like breast. In Roots, it is Frida who nourishes nature by giving birth to a vine” (315).

This self-portrait is particularly compelling in the way that it speaks directly to Khalo’s tragic desire for motherhood and her haunting relationship with a very traumatic past. After sustaining a series of critical injuries—including a shattered pelvis and impaled uterus—in a bus accident at the age of eighteen, Khalo’s body was mutilated and her reproductive capabilities were severely compromised (Herrera 49). Following multiple miscarriages and therapeutic abortions, Khalo’s womb proved to be inhospitable (Herrera xi), leaving her emotionally wounded and dismembered from her potential progeny. Although dreams of motherhood were decomposing in her psyche, Khalo’s self in this portrait miraculously attains maternity by raising a prolific garden amidst the hostile and infertile environment of the volcanic rock bed upon which she lies. Like a volcanic eruption, Khalo’s body is a site of origin that excretes plants and bloodlines rather than lava, spewing out life where it did not previously exist.

Embodying the metaphorical relationship between Mother and Mother Earth, this self-portrait fuses botany and genealogy in order to approach the paramount symbol of the family tree that Khalo herself could not bear. Depicting her own body as the maternal trunk from which various limbs extend, Khalo offers a surreal, matrifocal interpretation of reproduction and an alternative approach to motherhood in crisis. From this matrifocal perspective, Khalo’s self-portrait presents a visual, psychic text in which all of her corporeal trauma is purged through the cathartic image of her own disfigured body.

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61 When her mother fell ill following her birth, an Indian wet nurse suckled Khalo (Herrera 10). In addition to influencing her art, Khalo’s intimate relationship with this indigenous nana contributed to her “mythic embodiment of her Mexican heritage” (10).

62 In 1953, this portrait was exhibited at London’s Tate Gallery for the British Art Council’s Mexican art exhibition under the name El Pedregal (The Volcanic Rock Bed) (Herrera 314).
nursing the fragmented terrain.\textsuperscript{63} Khalo’s bodily rupture and disjointed landscape provide a visual allegory for the trope of physical and metaphorical dismemberment that fertilizes the alternative family structures or adoptive communities that I discuss over the course of this chapter. As Khalo’s most lucrative piece, selling for a record high of 5.6 million dollars at a Sotheby’s auction in New York in 2006, this portrait undoubtedly demonstrates the pervasiveness of the trope of mothering that I explore here further.

In this chapter, I propose the adoptive community as a symbolic redress for the bodies that have been dismembered from their biological kinship. I argue that the decomposition of the heteronormative nuclear family gives life to the rehabilitative adoptive communities that create queer or alternative kinship models. I revisit \textit{Del amor y otros demonios}, \textit{Son de Almendra}, and \textit{Nuestra señora de la noche} in an effort to uncover the literary elaborations of the adoptive community archetype. Rather than focusing on the disfigurement of the family itself, the authors of these novels offer alternative familial configurations that are othered by their nontraditional/unconventional arrangements. As matrifocal structures, adoptive communities offer compelling revisions of the nuclear family paradigm by departing from traditional patriarchal institutions and drawing attention to the prominent trope of motherhood in crisis, or what Myrl Coulter calls the “nonportrayals” (Coulter 40) of mothers and motherhood.

Over the course of this chapter, I analyze the shifting roles and responsibilities of nonbiological mother figures, while taking into consideration their symbolic meaning as the originary site of the adoptive community. In both \textit{Del amor de otros demonios} and

\textsuperscript{63} After battling Polio at the age of six and recovering from a series of life-threatening injuries following the bus accident she survived at age eighteen, Khalo developed gangrene and was forced to have her leg amputated at age forty-seven, less than a year before her death (Herrera 420).
Son de Almendra, othermothers actively integrate dismembered characters into fictive-familial fabrics through the performance of cultural kinship. Typically symbolizing the maternal wellspring for the physically and metaphorically dismembered bodies that they nurture, othermothers conceive adoptive communities through the performative strategies of habitus and improvisation. As acts of kinning, these maternal performances mobilize mother figures and eradicate the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Santos-Febres contributes to the literary mobilization of mother figures and the eradication of paternal figures in her novel, Nuestra señora de la noche. In her third wave feminist text, Santos-Febres depicts motherhood in crisis and repair by illuminating the feminist design of the matrifocal adoptive community. Rather than re-membering the women of Elizabeth’s Dancing Place to each other via habitus or cultural kinship, Santos-Febres devises an improvisational network of madrinas that share the common experience of being maternal sex workers.

Despite the diverse depictions of maternity that these novels offer, it appears that all three authors are engaged in a dialogue dedicated to the matrifocal revisioning of kinship. Articulating the relationship between biological reproduction and the cultural roles that it yields, kinship has often been limited to the exclusive/exclusionary context of biological filiation. Separating kinship from biology in an effort to elaborate “the social symbolics emerging from biological facts,” Claude Lévi-Strauss reconfigured kinship in terms of “alliances forged within practices of [exchanging]” women (Freeman 300). Within the frame of Lévi-Strauss’ theory, the exchange of women is enacted through the practice of marriage, which contractually ties one body to another, therefore prescribing a network of alliances encompassed by kinship. Historically utilized as a tool of oppression
to uphold the exclusive nature of kinship, marriage as the cornerstone of kinship, perpetuates patriarchy and reproduces the sex/gender system that Gayle Rubin explicates in her foundational essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.”

From a socio-cultural standpoint, Lévi-Strauss’ kinship apparatus fails to recognize the intricate networks of affiliation that are born out of societies that historically deprived people the right to marry or those that simply choose not to. Consider, for example, the intricate pattern of affiliations that emerged from the institution of slavery in which bodies were forcibly dismembered from their kinship structures, stripped of their humanity, and subsequently denied the rights to practice and perform interpersonal relationships through the act of marriage. With regard to slavery’s destruction of kinship, Elizabeth Freeman explains,

> Rather than naturalizing bodies for the marriage market, race slavery destroyed, distorted, and misrecognized indigenous regimes of alliance and descent to produce bodies that, by virtue of seeming without kin, were marketable, and that by virtue of being marketable, seemed bereft of kin. (303)

Lévi-Strauss’ interpretation of kinship faces great criticism as it has been contested and interrogated by subaltern studies and feminist theory.

In his fundamental work on the subject, David Schneider offers an alternative approach to redefining kinship in *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (1984). In his critical reevaluation of kinship, Schneider states, “all definitions of kinship, and in particular the very assumption that ‘kinship’ can be identified and distinguished, are not

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64 Rubin defines the sex/gender system as “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (159). As Elizabeth Freeman explains, Lévi-Strauss “presumes that the cultural roles of ‘exchanger’ and ‘exchanged’ correlate with the rigid distinctions in anatomical sex, but it does not explain the process through which this came to be so” (Freeman 301).
equally logically consistent or equally in accord with evidence” (5). Schneider examines kinship through a revisionist lens, redefining it as “an enacted practice” or “a kind of doing” that has been historically undermined by the structuralist theories that are grounded in marriage and “hypostatized heterosexuality” (Butler 34). By translating kinship into terms of practice, Schneider offers a model of kinship that parallels Saidiya Hartman’s interpretation of community as the performance of affiliation networks. This theoretical resonance leads me to the compelling dialogue located at the intersection of kinship and community in subaltern studies.

In her interventionist essay, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” Judith Butler interrogates the “distinguishability” of kinship from community by excavating the exclusionary nature of a traditional heterosexual kinship paradigm. Elucidating the stale language and dysfunctional apparatus that encompass the traditional kinship structure, Butler ultimately exposes its lack of relevance in contexts where heteronormativity is not practiced and heteronuclear models do not apply. When stripped of its biogenetic foundation and hypostatized heterosexuality, traditional kinship unravels in a way that not only displaces the central place of biological and sexual relations from its definition, but gives sexuality a separate domain from that of kinship, allowing as well for the durable tie to be thought outside of the conjugal frame, and opening kinship to a set of community ties that are irreducible to family. (Butler 37)

In order to become an operable model that can adapt to affiliative diversity, the concept of kinship must find its rearticulation in a broader discourse that privileges inclusion over exclusion.

Freeman attempts to queer kinship theory by revising the language and boundaries that define and constitute it. Upon evaluating the heterosexual access to
kinship in contrast to the queer exclusion from it, Freeman calls for a new terminology that is founded in corporeality. I find Freeman’s interpretation of kinship as “resolutely corporeal” to be highly insightful and pertinent because it speaks explicitly to the vulnerabilities and dependencies that are inscribed onto the human body. Freeman states, “In sum, kinship marks out a certain terrain of corporeal dependency…[and] delineates the caretaking activities that have not been socialized as services for purchase or as state entitlements…” (298). By reconfiguring kinship as a bodily practice, Freeman approaches the “technique of renewal” or “the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time” (298). I apply Freeman’s conception of kinship as a “technique of renewal” to my own model of adoptive community, which serves as redress for the vulnerable bodies that have undergone physical and/or genealogical dismemberment.

I read Butler’s feminist intervention in conjunction with Freeman’s queered expansion of kinship in order to buttress the hybridized paradigm of the adoptive community. Using the word adoptive as an allusion to the orphaned bodies that have been dismembered from the traditional kinship structure and the word community to delineate the non-biogenetic notions of the prototype I am proposing here, the adoptive community resonates with a miscengetated model that “consists of relationships renewed” (Freeman 308) and affiliations performed. Marking the high modernist transition from filiated communities to affiliated communities that Edward Said describes in “Secular Criticism” (1983), an adoptive community illuminates the difficulties and apparent staleness of filiation that have driven society to redefine human relationships. I present the adoptive community as a non-racially affiliated collection of characters that are performing
kinship through the fictive familial ties that they cultivate over time. Adoptive communities tend to form in domestic spaces (or spaces that substitute for the domestic) and often emerge in the wake of dismemberment’s plural forms: displacement, abandonment, and/or exile. First, I posit that the adoptive community offers an alternative matriarchal re-visioning of family that places generally marginalized female figures in leadership positions. Second, adoptive communities rely heavily on the oral and musical transmission of narratives, which include historical narratives or narratives of pain, memory, loss, etc. I further contend that the adoptive communities provide accessibility to the narratives by integrating them into the collective imaginary. Third, the adoptive community typically serves as an allegorical shelter for dismembered characters and orphans seeking refuge in limbo. Finally, adoptive communities challenge genealogy and turn the cult of patriarchy on its head, defying its regulatory principles and the scrutiny of its hegemonic gaze.

In the analysis that follows, I look at the emergence of adoptive communities as the performance of fictive kinship in García Márquez’ *Del amor y otros demonios*, Montero’s *Son de Almendra*, and Santos-Febres’ *Nuestra señora de la noche*. I use the term *kinning* to describe this performance as a rehabilitative practice that renews relationships between women and the non-filiated bodies that they nurture. Focusing on the roles of othermothers as a response to motherhood in crisis, this chapter looks into maternal dismemberment and the revised family models that it propagates.

*Del amor y otros demonios*

In his novel, *Del amor y otros demonios*, Gabriel García Márquez taps into the theme of maternal dismemberment that so often problematizes the relationships between
mothers and daughters in Caribbean literature. The illegitimate daughter of the Marquis of Casaldueiro and the mestiza Bernarda Cabrera, Sierva María is violently rejected by her biological parents and raised by the slaves that cohabit her family’s city palace. Since the earliest stages of her infancy, Sierva María was a foundling, discarded and reviled by her biological mother: “La niña, hija de noble y plebeya, tuvo una infancia de expósita. La madre la odió desde que le dio mamar por la única vez, y se negó a tenerla con ella por temor de matarla” (60). Despised by her mother and disregarded by her father, Sierva María is banished to the slave quarters where her body is recovered and recuperated by an adoptive community of slaves that claim her as their own. As the matriarch of this matrifocal model, Dominga de Adviento personifies the stereotypical black caretaker whose characterization is entangled with the stereotype of womanhood: “that of the idealized mother who is self-denying in her generosity, protecting, and undemanding, who lives to serve, who expects nothing in return” (Williams 127). Despite her position of servitude, Dominga de Adviento is portrayed as an authoritative figure, governing the household with an iron fist and mediating the loveless marriage between the marquis and his hostile wife. In spite of the authoritative order she maintains in the household, Dominga de Adviento’s power is still undermined by the fact that she is enslaved. For that reason, I locate Dominga’s domestic authority in the potential threat that she presents to her white masters.

Historically regarded as dangerous purveyors of witchcraft, women of color in colonial Cartagena were often treated as enemies of the Inquisition. Because santería and other syncretic religions were conflated with hechicería and brujería, their practitioners were often accused of subverting the social order and racial norms established by the
Church and Crown. As Kathryn Joy McKnight explains with regard to Cartagena’s Inquisition, accusations leveled against the practitioners of hechicería and brujería unleashed a gendered discourse that would stigmatize women of color for centuries to come. According to McKnight:

Hechicería is an accusation leveled at an individual; it pertains to the use of spells and remedies for both negative and positive purposes and often involves the use of natural materials. Under this category would fall the widespread practices of amatory magic, to which all three matrix cultures contributed—Spanish, Amerindian, and African. Brujería, on the other hand, is a charge that identifies and stigmatizes a socially defined group. It points to sects of witches who—at least at the level of the inquisitors’ imagination—gather to practice diabolical idolatry. (McKnight 65)

The typical association of males with hechicería and females with brujería conveys an interesting message regarding the Inquisition’s perception and fear of black women in society. Depicted as devil worship lacking the remedial or curative properties of hechicería, brujería provided the Church with the power to label those, specifically women, on the social and religious margins as witches. By placing women at the forefront of brujería, the Church could illegitimatize the religious aspects of their practices because religion, in the mind of the inquisitor, was built upon the patriarchal foundation of white, male authority. By brutally persecuting the religious practices of brujería, the Inquisition robbed black women of agency and forced them into a position of submission, in which their voices were muffled and their words were manipulated by the biased interpretations of a white priest. At the same time, however, women who escaped the Inquisition’s oppressive gaze appropriated a sense of agency by using the collective stigma as a source of individual power, which brings me back to my point of departure: Dominga de Adviento.
Maintaining order in the household until the day she died, Dominga de Adviento personifies the supportive (if not stereotypical) backbone that harnesses two kinds of power: a symbolic power as the enslaved domestic mediator and a realized power as the matriarch of an adoptive community. At the primal scenes of birth and maternal rejection, Dominga de Adviento rescues Sierva María’s vulnerable body and immediately assumes the role of a mother figure: “la amamantó, la bautizó en Cristo y la consagró a Olokun, una deidad yoruba de sexo incierto, cuyo rostro se presume tan temible que sólo se deja ver en sueños, y siempre con una mascara” (García Márquez 60). As Gilberto Freyre notes in *The Masters and the Slaves*, having a black wet-nurse often carried prophylactic concerns related to bodily hygiene and spiritual protection (337). García Márquez inverts the implications of the black wet nurse in his novel and satirically transforms the traditional prophylactic benefits of black breast milk into a source of contamination. Sierva María’s hygenic and spiritual vulnerability—that is her (alleged) contraction of the racially stigmatized rabies disease and her subsequent Catholic exorcism—can thus be linked to her earliest moments of receiving nourishment from a black body.

Under the discretion and care of her black othermother, Sierva Maria becomes completely Africanized, as she not only participates in slave-related tasks and activities, but also speaks three African languages, masters African dance, and practices the Yoruba-based worship of santería. Sierva María’s swift adaptation to black culture speaks to her originary dismemberment from her biological mother, or what Laura Niesen de Abruna calls “the effects of the loss of the maternal matrix” in which “[t]he alienation from the mother becomes a metaphor for the white Creole girl’s alienation from the mother culture” (14). Because Sierva María is alienated from her mother and her mother
culture, she is forced to recover the missing maternal matrix and its cultural counterpart through the adoptive community. Fulfilling the maternal responsibilities left empty by Sierva María’s biological mother, Dominga de Adviento passes physical and cultural markers of blackness on to Sierva María in the form of “habitus”—a “learned bodily disposition, stance, or schema” that Freeman evaluates as a practice or performance of kinship (305). Placing great emphasis on corporeality and the role of the body in kinship, Freeman unpacks Pierre Bourdieu’s model of “habitus” in terms of “communication” and thinks about it “less as a verbal transaction and more as a kind of contagion, in the sense that diseases are communicated” (Freeman 306). This notion of habitus grows out of Bourdieu’s theory in which “kinship is a set of acts that may or may not follow the officially recognized lines of alliance and descent, and that in any case take precedence over the latter in everyday life” (Freeman 305). In Bourdieu’s “practical kinship” model, habitus is the practice of a “‘shared substance’ between bodies” (305), which, in the case of Sierva María, can be traced back to her ingestion of Dominga’s black breast milk. Countermanding the procreative or biogenetic models of kinship, the concept of habitus “suggests an organic but not reproductive sense of [cultural] transmission” that proves to be a symbolic representational mode of embodiment (306).

Sierva María’s adoptive community grounds itself in habitus, a practice of *kinning* that allows members like her othermother, Dominga de Adviento to transmit a “culturally symbolized identity” (Freeman 306) to a body that would otherwise be stranded in genetic limbo: “[Dominga de Adviento] era el enlace entre aquellos dos mundos. Alta y ósea, de una inteligencia casi clarividente, era ella quien había criado a Sierva María”
Consider, for example, the ways in which Sierva María’s body is redressed and re-presented through blackness:

Por orden de Dominga de Adviento las esclavas más jóvenes le pintaban la cara con negro de humo, le colgaron collares de santería sobre el escapulario del bautismo y le cuidaban la cabellera que nunca le cortaron y que le habría estorbado para caminar de no ser por las trenzas de muchas vueltas que le hacían a diario. (García Márquez 19)

As a contested territory, Sierva María’s body can be reduced to her racial and sexual indeterminacy and easily disguised by the members of her adoptive community. Literally and metaphorically wearing blackness, Sierva María’s soot-covered face is reminiscent of the blackface tradition, which was popular throughout the Americas. Growing infamous in twentieth century American cinema, blackface became a vehicle for ethnic assimilation as it “appropriated an imaginary blackness to Americanize the immigrant son” (Rogin 421). Blackface became a method for escaping or simply concealing one’s ethnic otherness by asserting whiteness through this black mask. García Márquez repeats and revises this American tradition by Africanizing its intentions: rather than using Sierva María’s “racial masquerade” as a vehicle for asserting white privilege, García Márquez puts his protagonist in blackface in order to contaminate her white privilege and emphasize her racial ambiguity. According to Rogin’s analysis of blackface:

As disguise blackface capitalizes on identity as sameness; as expression it creates identity as difference. Interiority generated and repressed by the culture of origin finds public form through the blackface mask. Evoking an imagined alternative communal identity, blackface frees […] from the pull of […] inherited […] communal identicalness. The depersonalizing mask reaches a substrate of emotional expression out of which a new selfhood is born. (440)

Concealing and confirming her whiteness at the same time, Sierva María’s blackface is a vehicle for *kinning* that allows her to secure a position in black culture. In Africanizing Sierva María’s non-black body, the slaves grant her access to the slave quarters, the
threshold of their adoptive community. Within this marginalized space, Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles is transformed into “María Mandinga,” an identity that allows her to freely navigate a world of Africanity and enslavement as the quarters’ only free (non-enslaved) inhabitant: “En aquel mundo opresivo en el que nadie era libre, Sierva María lo era: sólo ella y sólo allí. De modo que era allí donde se celebraba la fiesta, en su verdadera casa y con su verdadera familia” (García Márquez 19). As the only free body in the slave quarters, Sierva María’s black identity promotes her reverse assimilation; rather than assimilating to white dominant society and culture, Sierva María assimilates to the only community that embraces her as family—that of the black Other. In her groundbreaking book entitled *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, Kyla Wazana Thompkins explores the politics of consumption and the performance of eating as it relates to race, class, and the body. By theorizing “eating as a racially performative act,” Thompkins uncovers the racial implications of ingestion and relates the trope of blackface, “in which blackness is put on” to the metaphor of ingestion, in which “blackness is put in” (11, emphasis in original). Echoing Thompkins argument, I maintain that Sierva María’s blackface scene is not one of subjection, but one of ingestion that marks her complete immersion into the adoptive community.

Because Sierva María’s blackface contributes to the trope of black bodies caring for the white body and symbolizes a performative bond that physically relates Sierva María to her adoptive community, the act is not exploitative, but therapeutic. When the racial roles are reversed however—as they are in Rosario Ferré’s *La casa de la laguna*—the blackface tradition yields drastically different consequences. Consider, for example, the scene from *La casa de la laguna*, in which Petra’s great-granddaughter, Carmelina, is
first introduced to whiteness through the Mendizábal family. As the product of rape, Carmelina is secretly passed from Petra’s violated daughter, Alwilda to Petra so that she can be raised and cared for by an experienced matriarch. In spite of the protection and nurture that Petra delivers, however, Carmelina is transformed into a vulnerable body that falls victim to the carelessness and cruelty of her white counterparts.65

Upon first meeting Carmelina, Rebeca Mendizábal sets a precedent for racial objectification that is replicated by her spoiled young daughters, Patria and Libertad. Referring to Carmelina as a black Kewpie doll (262), Rebeca immediately objectifies the baby in Petra’s arms and establishes a derogatory discourse of racial difference that endangers Carmelina throughout her stay in the house on the lagoon. Once Carmelina is recast as a black Kewpie doll, Patria and Libertad treat the black child as if she were an inanimate toy or plaything, rehearsing dehumanization much like the slave children that Freyre describes in *The Masters and the Slaves*. According to Freyre, the “functions” of the “Negro playmate” in post/slave societies paralleled

> those of an obliging puppet, manipulated at will by the [children] of the family; [s]he was squeezed, mistreated, tormented just as if [s]he had been made of sawdust on the inside—of cloth and sawdust…rather than of flesh and blood like white children. (Freyre 349)

Coinciding with Freyre’s account of racially charged relations between children, Ferré’s depiction of Carmelina’s objectification demonstrates the dangers of young white whims. When Patria grows tired of playing with “una muñeca negra,” she and Libertad decide to paint Carmelina white in what turns out to be a profound scene of subjection:

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65 Carmelina’s vulnerability is tested yet again when Quintín rapes her behind the mangrove swamps at Lucumi beach. As Carmelina’s paternal figure, Quintín commits an act of metaphorical incest, while demonstrating the harmful effects that white “care givers” have on black bodies.
La desnudaron y, mientras Patria sostenía a Carmelina por la cintura, Libertad le pasaba la brocha impregnada de pintura blanca por todo el cuerpo. Al principio, Carmelina encontró el juego divertido, pero pronto empezó a sentirse incómoda y le dio una patada a Libertad para tumbarle la brocha de la mano. (262)

In this racial reversal of the blackface tradition, Carmelina becomes a caricature of whiteness. Although Patria and Libertad are wildly entertained by this inverted minstrel show, Carmelina finds herself terrified and intoxicated: “Una vez terminaron, llevaron a Carmelina al baño para que viera lo bonita que estaba. Cuando Carmelina vio aquel fantasmita blanco mirándola desde el espejo, empezó a gritar”(263). After losing consciousness, Carmelina is rushed to the hospital where she is treated for lead poisoning and told that the white paint would have killed her had she left it on her skin any longer: “Una media hora más de ser blanca, y Carmelina se hubiese muerto” (263). In addition to reversing the tradition of blackface, Ferré reverses racial stereotypes, assigning contamination and danger to whiteness rather than to blackness; the poisonous paint exposes the toxicity of whiteness and the harm that black bodies suffer under white care and supervision. Therefore, this scene of subjection offers a compelling commentary on the articulation of corporeal (racial) difference and the black body’s transformation into a spectacle.

Conjuring images of minstrelsy, Carmelina’s white-face episode is fraught with a perverted mix of violence and pleasure that dates back to slavery’s primal scenes of subjection. Tapping into the “terror of pleasure—the violence that undergirded the comic moment in minstrelsy—and the pleasure of terror—the force of evil that propelled the plot of melodrama and fascinated the spectator,” the minstrel stage offered a theater for racial oppression that “(re)produced blackness as an essentially pained expression of the body’s possibilities” (Hartman 32). In her reappropriation of the minstrel tradition, Ferré
translates *whiteness* into a pained expression of the vulnerable black body, proving that there are destructive if not deadly repercussions when white bodies are caring for black bodies. Ferré’s representation of minstrelsy, like Hartman’s interpretation of it attempts to elucidate the means by which the wanton use of and the violence directed toward the black body come to be identified as its pleasure and dangers—that is, the expectations of slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved, and moreover, the ascription of excess and enjoyment to the African effaces the violence perpetrated against the enslaved. (Hartman 26)

Wearing cultural camouflage and cross-dressing in blackness, Sierva María’s syncretic identity is not solely limited to the habitus that she inherits from Dominga de Adviento and her adoptive community; it can also be attributed to her unstable pedigree:

> Empezaba a florecer en una encrucijada de fuerzas contrarias. Tenía muy poco de la madre. Del padre, en cambio, tenía el cuerpo escuálido, la timidez irreductible, la piel livida, los ojos de un azul taciturno, y el cobre puro de la caballera radiante. Su modo de ser era tan sigiloso que parecía una criatura invisible. (García Márquez 20)

Making no mention of Bernarda’s contribution to Sierva María’s physical appearance, this description dismembers and disqualifies Bernarda from her daughter’s genetic makeup. Is Bernarda’s omission from this excerpt contingent upon her being *mestiza* or is it a metaphor for her absence from Sierva María’s life? In either case, I am led to believe that her invisibility is linked to her racial indeterminacy and unreadable body. This trend of indeterminacy seems to be one that afflicts specifically those born on American soil. Consider for example, Father Cayetano Delaura’s mother, the American-born *criolla* to whom he bears no resemblance and Sierva María, the elusive racial anomaly. Perhaps invisibility is the product of genealogical contamination, or rather:

> [El] batiburrillo de sangre que habían hecho desde la conquista: sangre de español con sangre de indios, de aquéllos y éstos con negros de toda laya, hasta
mandingas musulmanes, y se preguntó si semejante contubernio cabría en el reino de Dios. (García Márquez 138)

At this point I will refer back to the original excerpt describing Sierva María, paying close attention to the Africanized subtext that undermines her affiliations with whiteness and replaces her indeterminate mother with notions of blackness. By choosing the word “encrucijada” to describe Sierva María’s genealogy, García Márquez is consciously associating his protagonist with the highly respected orisha, Echú (Esu), guardian of the crossroads. As the ultimate trickster figure, Esu (like Sierva María) is a celebrated character of contradiction associated with “individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, [and] ambiguity” (Gates 6). Furthermore, Esu (like Sierva María) is the speaker and interpreter of “all” languages and master of the “elusive, mystical border that separates the divine world from the profane (Gates 6). Sierva María is further Africanized by her unusually radiant copper hair. Coincidentally, copper is the color associated with the orisha Ochún (Oshun) and her Catholic counterpart, La Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre (Our Lady of Charity). Aligned with beauty, love and generosity, Ochún or La Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre is a trickster in her own right, as she can appear in multiple forms, some of which include young and old women (Pinn 21). The fact that Sierva María’s physical attributes can only be traced to her biological father and black othermother leads me to believe that she is a metaphorical racial/sexual mulata.

Solidifying Sierva María’s orphanhood or familial dismemberment is her experience with displacement. As a body in motion, Sierva María is uprooted and

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66 The trope of racial contamination speaks to the emergence of casta paintings in eighteenth century Mexico and Peru. Depicting the process of the mestizaje among Indian, Spanish, and black inhabitants of the Spanish colonies, casta paintings explicitly decipher the racial combinations of Spanish America while creating a discourse of difference (Katzew 2). This discourse consisted of racial taxonomies that ranged from basic terms like mestizo (Spanish-Indian) and mulatto (Spanish-black) to complicated phrases such as tente en al aire (hold-yourself-in-mid-air) and no te entiendo (I-don’t-understand-you) (Katzew 4).
dislocated on numerous occasions. When Sierva María is forcibly dispossessed of her origins and abandoned at the convent of Santa Clara, two black slave women rescue and recuperate her body, establishing another branch of her adoptive community. Because of her black habitus and the cultural symbols (santería necklaces, affinity for African languages, and black name—María Mandinga) marking her white body, Sierva María reestablishes “practical kinship” and recovers her world (“su mundo”) through the adoptive community that inhabits the convent’s black-staffed kitchen. As a “dystopic” space dominated by abjection and dismemberment (chopping, cutting, scraping, etc.), the kitchen is the only appropriate space for the metaphorically dismembered Sierva María.

As Thompkins explains, the kitchen is

a space whose politics and representations must be analysed in terms of abjection and inversion. The kitchen in this formulation is a space of blood and guts, plucked chickens and cooked tongue, rancid and sweet butter, rising bread and fermenting beers, and other items only semi-formed on their way to the site of ingestion, be it dining room or kitchen tables. (Tompkins 10)

As cultural territory for her new adoptive community, Sierva María is reinitiated into blackness with the sacrifice of a castrated goat, the sacred food of Babalú-Ayé (Babluaiye), *orisha* patron of sickness and health (Murphy 105):

Ayudó a degollar un chivo que se resistía a morir. Le sacó los ojos y le cortó las criadillas, que eran las partes que más le gustaban. Jugó al diablo con los adultos en la cocina y con los niños del patio, les ganó a todos. Cantó en Yoruba, en congo, en mandinga, y aun los que no entendían la escucharon absortos. Al almuerzo se comió un plato con las criadillas y los ojos del chivo, guisados en manteca de cerdo y sazonados con especias ardientes. (García Márquez 88)

According to Mary Douglas, “the rituals of sacrifice specify what kind of animal shall be used, young or old, male, female, or neutered, and that these rules signify various aspects of the situation which calls for sacrifice” (142). According to santería tradition, castrating a goat in the name of Babalú-Ayé prevents the “reproduction” of sickness in
the infected body seeking protection (Gonzalez-Wippler 159). This proves to be particularly significant based on the fact that Sierva María is at the convent because of her assumed contraction of the rabies disease. As this scene calls into question the racialization of food and the invisible contamination that it generates, it also demonstrates a profound dichotomy between Africanity and Christianity: Africanity sacrifices animals, but Christianity sacrifices human bodies (consider the execution of Mackandal, Bouckman, and eventually, Sierva María).

Upon being discovered amidst the invisible contamination that defines the sub-cultural space of the kitchen, Sierva María is torn from the breast of Africanity yet again and placed under the discretion of Father Delaura.67 The forced movement of Sierva María’s body from the kitchen to a cell transforms her into a kinless captive and ultimately seals her fate as a victim of white custody and patriarchal supervision. Over the course of her truncated life, white paternal figures have abandoned, endangered, and violated Sierva María’s vulnerable, prepubescent body in the name of protection and guardianship. I interpret this pattern of paternal pitfalls as a critique of patriarchy, which in turn, buttresses the matrifocal foundation of the adoptive community. Constantly restoring her battered body in the wake of violence and/or trauma, the maternal support offered by the adoptive community rescues Sierva María from the anti/genealogical limbo that characterizes her abbreviated existence.

**Son de Almendra**

In her novel *Son de Almendra*, Mayra Montero weaves together two complementary narratives that capture the plurality of the Cuban (Caribbean) experience.

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67 Sierva María’s being “adopted” by the Church and “fostered” by Father Delaura alludes to the patriarchal model described in Duque de Estrada’s previously discussed slave manual, *Doctrina para negros*. 
While Joaquín’s narrative is dominated by a violent, brutal realism, Yolanda’s herstory can be characterized by a marvelous realism that mysteriously complicates and confuses her genealogical trajectory. In the spirit of marvelous realism, Yolanda’s narrative delivers a depiction of reality that is distorted by the inexplicable events, uncontested mysteries, and inherited superstitions of circus culture. Over the course of Yolanda’s narrative, the circus is presented as a marginalized community of nomadic performers that are bound to one another by the shared experience of dismemberment. As circus performers, the members of this adoptive community are also performing kinship, raising each other’s children and creating an intricate myth of origins that de/stabilizes them in their anti/genealogical limbo.

Upon opening her narrative, Yolanda admits that her real name is Fantina, a name that she received from her godfather, el mago portugués and her biological mother, Tula. In an effort to create a myth of origins, Yolanda refocuses herstory on to her mother, exposing a history of abandonment and orphanhood that is integral to her characterization and identity. Thus, Yolanda maps out her own past through that of Tula, a young wife and mother of two living in the town of Coliseo, located in the province of Matanzas. When the circus arrives in search of a local seamstress, Tula’s mother-in-law, regarded as the town’s premiere dressmaker, is enlisted to repair a cape for the show’s ringleader and chief magician, el mago portugués. Tula is immediately drawn to the magician and describes the sensation of her soul being hooked and pulled toward him: “sintió como si

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68 In El realismo maravilloso, Irlemar Chiampi explores the magical and the marvelous, as they pertain to the construction and interpretation of reality in the literature of Latin America. Chiampi states: “Contrariamente a lo mágico, el término maravilloso presenta ventajas de orden lexical, poético e histórico para significar la nueva modalidad de la narrativa realista hispanoamericana” (Chiampi 53). Thus, the marvelous is synonymous with the extraordinary and related to the supernatural; it proves to be a more flexible term than magical.
el alma de aquel hombre hubiera enganchado la suya con un anzuelo finito y con hilo invisible del que empezó a tirar, tirar, tirar, hasta que cogió en la mano y se la echó en la boca” (57). Captivated by the *mago* and captured by his invisible hook, Tula abandons her husband and two children—Yolanda and Fico—fleeing her native province of Matanzas and joining the circus troupe that was magically tugging at her soul. Upon joining the troupe, Tula is recruited as a dancer and quickly finds herself romantically involved with the circus’ dog trainer and pregnant with her third child, Fantina.

Never comfortable with her birth name, Yolanda abandons Fantina immediately after amputating her arm. She aptly renames herself Yolanda, in honor of her mother’s first child: “Escogí Yolanda porque así se llama mi hermana mayor, a la que no conozco, ni siquiera sé dónde vive, si es que vive” (57). By choosing the name Yolanda as a replacement for Fantina, Yolanda entangles her own genealogy with that of her mother’s original family, for Yolanda was the name of the sister she never knew—the first daughter that her mother abandoned before joining the circus. Therefore, the renaming of Fantina’s post-amputated self is a tribute to her half-sister’s amputation from her biological mother. Like her half-sister of the same name, Yolanda eventually finds herself orphaned by Tula as well: “Ella se fue disligando poco a poco de ese mundo, y yo viajaba al cuidado de mi padre y de la china, hasta que mamá se desdibujó por completo” (59).

In this case, the history of abandonment violently reproduces itself, leaving both Yolandas dismembered by/from the mother that birthed them.

Following her mother’s disappearance and her father’s death, Yolanda’s biological kinship is devastated. Although she gives birth to her son Daniel at the age of fifteen, la Chinita claims him in the name of othermothering when Yolanda’s arm is
amputated a year later. Although Yolanda’s physical dismemberment marks her amputation from her biological parents as well as a detachment from her biological son, it metaphorically binds her to the adoptive community that was established immediately following her birth into the clan of circus performers. There is, however, a profound irony casting shadows over the fact that Yolanda’s loss (dismemberment) and rehabilitation (re-memberment) occur within the same space of the circus. In her book, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*, Helen Stoddart writes,

> Circus is, above all, a vehicle for the demonstration and taunting of danger and this remains its most telling and defining feature. Physical risk-taking has always been at its heart; the recognition that to explore the limitations of the human body is to walk a line between triumphant and exhilaration and, on the other side of this limit, pain, injury, or death. The body in the circus is utterly self-reliant; it is preserved by skill and strength only, never by faith, fate or magic. (4)

Stoddart’s notion of the circus is anchored in the corporeal, much like Freeman’s notion of kinship, which “marks out a certain terrain of corporeal dependency” (298). The irony thus lies in the fact that Yolanda’s adoptive community—the circus itself—symbolizes a space that conjoins corporeal independence and dependency, two bodily states that are divided by vulnerability. The sawing of Yolanda’s arm symbolizes her transition from an independent body in the circus to a dependent body in the adoptive community. As Hartman writes, this

> belonging together endeavors to redress and nurture the broken body; it is a becoming together dedicated to establishing other terms of sociality, however transient, that offer a small measure of relief from the debasements of one’s condition. (Hartman 61)

Following her amputation, Yolanda remains in the hospital surrounded by the only family she has: “A mi lado estaba Chinita con el niño [Daniel] en los brazos, también estaban Sindhi y el dueño del circo, mi padrino, a ambos se les salían las
lágrimas y prometieron que nunca me iban a desamparar” (63). It is in this moment of tragedy that Yolanda’s adoptive community is activated to perform the roles and responsibilities of her missing kin. While contemplating the support network surrounding her, Yolanda recalls the mother that disappeared like her arm and attempts to recover images of her face from memory. Following this process of re-membering the dismembered, Tula mysteriously reappears beside Yolanda, caring for her during her hospitalization and encouraging her to leave the circus in search of Daniel’s father: “Me aconsejó que buscara al padre de mi hijo, dejara el circo y también a la china, que ya estaba bueno de vagar con extraños” (63). Accustomed to the practice of abandonment, Tula’s advice is not unprecedented considering she has left her family on two separate occasions. Refusing to lead the same life as her mother, Yolanda defies the repetition of history and re-members herself to the circus—“las únicas personas a las que en realidad consideraba de la familia” (63).

I am compelled to look deeper into the competing images of the mother figure that Montero puts forth in Yolanda’s narrative. As Yolanda’s biological mother, Tula personifies an unstable figure that continuously rejects the responsibilities and roles attached to mothering. Borrowing Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s language, I argue that Tula is a “mother without child,” a term that could eventually be applied to Chinita and Yolanda as well. As Hansen explains, the rubric of the “mother without child” encompasses nontraditional mothers and ‘bad mothers,’ including lesbians and slave mothers; women who have abortions and miscarriages; women who refuse to bear children, or whose children are stolen from them; and mothers who are…sometimes criminals, murderers, prisoners, suicides, time travelers, tricksters, or ghosts. (Hansen 10)
Although Tula is neither demonized nor explicitly labeled a “bad mother” at any point in the narrative, her refusal to mother is emphasized by Chinita’s insistence on mothering. As Tula’s counterpoint and Yolanda’s othermother, Chinita sutures the wounds left open by the rupture of mother-daughter estrangement. Rather than assuming the responsibilities of motherhood, Chinita takes on the roles of mothering, ultimately raising both Yolanda and Daniel over the course of her life. I use the word mothering here rather than motherhood to illuminate the difference between experience and institution, respectively. In her groundbreaking text, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), Adrienne Rich distinguishes between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (13, emphasis in original)

Because second-wave feminism has linked the institution of motherhood to that of patriarchy, there has been a feminist push toward “empowered mothering” which sets out to “reclaim that power for mothers to imagine and implement a mode of mothering that mitigates the many ways that patriarchal motherhood, both discursively and materially, regulates and restrains mothers and their mothering” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 17). As an empowered othermother, Chinita provides for Yolanda and Daniel what Tula could not.

As the matriarch of Yolanda’s adoptive community, Chinita recovers and recuperates Yolanda’s broken body. An orphan herself—“no tuvo madre ni padre, y lo único que veía en su mente, cuando trataba de hacer memoria, era la cara del mago portugués que la crió” (60)—Chinita serves as an othermother for Yolanda, whose

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69 In the afterlife, Chinita emerges as a trickster ghost, a maternal archetype that falls within the boundaries of Hansen’s “child without mother.”
orphan status is ultimately solidified by her mother’s disappearance and her father’s
death. Protesting the patriarchal institution of motherhood and performing maternal roles
on the communal level, Chinita mothers everybody’s children but her own and thus
becomes a surrogate mother “who nurtures bonds that dissolved religious and ethnic
differences” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 22). Chinita raises and nurtures Yolanda,
establishing a performative kinship that is based on habitus or “non-reproductive
corporeal transfer” (Freeman 306): "Chinita se apropió de mí, me disfrazaba como ella y
me enseñó a decir frases en cantonés” (Montero 59). Yolanda acquires the habitus of her
Chinese othermother, speaking Cantonese, drinking Chinese tea, and frequenting el
barrio chino with Joaquín. By drawing attention to Yolanda’s inheritance of these
culturally generated traits, Montero suggests that “all kinship may, indeed, be a matter of
poses, gestures, performances” and habits (Freeman 307).

Under Chinita’s guidance and care, Yolanda learns the importance of being a
present mother for Daniel, the son she has when she is fifteen, just one year before losing
her arm in the saw box accident. According to Chinita, there is nothing crueler in this life
than not being able to remember the face of one’s mother (“no había nada más cruel en
esta vida que no poder recordar la cara de una madre…” ) (60). As a victim of maternal
abandonment herself, Yolanda vows to be a present mother after she gives birth to
Daniel, the product of her sexual encounter with a white police officer. Maturing into a
talented trapeze artist, Daniel remains in the circus under Chinita’s supervision in the
years following Yolanda’s dismemberment and subsequent detachment from the troupe.
Daniel’s penchant for the art of trapeze is a telling component of his symbolic character.
As a sign in itself,
the trapeze artist is contradictory in that, although their performance is intensely immediate and visceral, the fact that this labour works to service the illusion of an insubstantial body means that the trapeze artist, above all other circus performers, seems to embody the circus’s own more general fantasy of itself as a space of transcendence in which the usual constraints of time and space do not operate. (Stoddart 177)

Performing the illusion of an insubstantial body, Daniel happens to have a rather substantial body unlike his mother, Yolanda. In fact, Daniel exhibits a certain bodily precision, fierce agility, and muscular dependence that dictate his movements: “esa imperiosa agilidad que machacaba al prójimo, como si el músculo, todos sus músculos, fueran otro cerebro, o el único cerebro disponible. Era un muchacho que pensaba con los bíceps” (230). Daniel’s ability to embody the contradiction of this corporeal illusion speaks to the transcendence of time, space, and genealogy affiliated with the fantasy of the circus. Daniel symbolizes a body in motion, neither grounded in reality nor anchored in family. Swinging between his biological kinship (Yolanda) and his adoptive community (Chinita), the circus stage and the city streets, the real and the marvelous, Daniel epitomizes the in/substantial body in limbo.

Chinita’s death marks Yolanda’s (and Daniel’s) finite separation from the metaphorical mother. In psychoanalysis, birth has been construed as a primal scene of splitting that marks the “constitutive division of maternity” (Hansen 21). Because Chinita mothered Yolanda and Daniel without giving birth to them, the originary moment of separation was denied. Chinita’s death substitutes for the separation that is most often associated with birth and marks a maternal presence that is accounted for via absence. As rupture and loss, Chinita’s death engenders Daniel’s rejecting his birth mother (Yolanda) and reclaiming his othermother as his only mother: “<<Se fue mi madre>>, lo oí decir, y en ese instante todo lo que ya era lento de detuvo, mi propio corazón se me paró en el
pecho; no podía respirar, ni ver, ni imaginar más que palabras de remordimiento” (Montero 147). Upon hearing Daniel’s rejection, Yolanda is catapulted into a state of limbo that symbolizes the paradox of being a mother without child: “Estaba sola, pero siempre lo estuve. Extrañaba a Chinita, y sobre todo extrañaba a mi hijo, que se había quedado para siempre en el circo, no quiso volver conmigo, su vida estaba en la troupe, en el lugar al que pertenecía” (Montero 149). By recognizing the fact that Daniel has rooted himself in the circus, Yolanda realizes that her son is repeating her own history, just as she repeated that of her mother:

La historia parecía repetirse, porque Chinita insistió en quedarse al cuidado de Daniel, como años atrás, había insistido en quedarse cuidándome a mí. Sólo que, a diferencia de mi madre, yo no tenía ganas de desligarme de mi hijo, él se quedaba por lo del trapecio, no podía dejar las prácticas en esa etapa. La china me prometió que ella lo cuidaría y le daría de comer, aunque pensé que terminaría siendo a la inversa y mi hijo cuidaría de ella…(84)

Recounting the historical repetition and cyclical turn of events that complicate genealogical continuity, Yolanda’s narrative grounds itself in marvelous realism and grapples with the entangled bloodlines that are exposed in the wake of Chinita’s death. Taking most of her secrets to the grave, Chinita corrupts Yolanda’s myth of origins by sending her a cryptic message from the afterlife. As a genealogical twist of fate, this posthumous message debunks the stories of life and death that Chinita shared before she died. From Yolanda’s conception to el mago’s alleged death, the genealogical details previously provided by Chinita lose meaning when a mysterious stranger named Benjamin appears at Yolanda’s door in search of his long-lost sister. Introducing himself as Chinita’s abandoned son, Benjamin explains that he and Yolanda are stepsiblings, for
he is the child of Lala (Chinita) and el mago portugués. Under the impression that he and Yolanda share a father, Benjamin attempts to recover the missing pieces of his genealogical puzzle and rebuild the myth of origins that he was denied in orphanhood. Upon reviewing Yolanda’s old “family” photos during his visit, Benjamin identifies a familiar face in that of el mago portugués: “Yo le juro que es Horacio, con la misma verruga aquí, cerca del labio, y este dedo doblado, fíjese en este dedo, y es la nariz y es todo. Es el mismo hombre, pero no lo entiendo” (211). Insisting that el mago is Horacio, Benjamin conflates his biological father with the late friend of his adoptive parents and the doctor that brought both of his daughters into the world. In an effort to validate his argument, Benjamin explains that Horacio was married to a woman named Gertrudis who returned to her native province of Matanzas, following Horacio’s recent death. Because Tula is the nickname most often assigned to Gertrudis and Matanzas is her place of origin, Yolanda realizes that Horacio’s widow is actually her biological mother, which, in turn, suggests that Horacio and el mago portugués are the same man.

This news proves to be unsettling for Yolanda, as she watches her previously constructed myth of origins—built upon a romance between her mother, Tula, and the dog trainer— unravel before her eyes. In spite of her efforts to dismiss Benjamin’s story as hearsay, Yolanda becomes very much aware of his resemblance to Chinita:

me di cuenta de que se parecía a la china, no porque fuera chino, que tampoco lo era completamente, sino por el modo de mover los labios y por la forma de beber el té, esas cosas se aprenden de convivir con la madre, de tocarla y de tenerla cerca. (210)

The profound irony of Yolanda’s realization lies in the fact that Benjamin—abandoned by the fourteen year-old Chinita at birth—never knew his mother and therefore never had

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70 Yolanda did not know Chinita’s real name until the day she died: “sólo cuando murió supimos su verdadero nombre, el cantonés que estaba en sus papeles” (209).
the opportunity to inherit her habitus. With that, Yolanda becomes suspicious of their striking similarities and considers the possibility that Benjamin and his two daughters, both of whom bear strong physical resemblance to *el mago* and Chinita, embody some kind of supernatural enigma:

se me ocurrió la idea de que aquel hombre y sus dos hijas no eran lo que habían dicho. Me pregunté si no sería un truco de Chinita, en vida había sido una mujer de trucos, y su fantasma tenía que ser igual: venir a mi casa disfrazada para advertirme de algo, o para enseñarme algo. Chinita era partida en tres: un hombre casi de su edad, bastante parecido a ella, y dos niñas que significaban otra cosa, dos caminos antiguos, cada una con un trocito del espíritu de Lala, el nombre que no llegué a conocer. (213)

Using the language of illusion, trickery, and disfigurement (as bodily division, *partida* and disguise, *disfrazada*) to describe Chinita’s posthumous message, Yolanda is, in a sense, describing the very essence of the circus and signifying on her own experience as a body that was disfigured by the trickery and illusion of the saw box. In her attempt to decipher this riddle from the afterlife, Yolanda realizes that Chinita’s lesson is as difficult to decode as the uncanny coincidences that it uncovers. Lost in the throes of fact and fiction, magic and reality, Yolanda describes a sentiment of limbo that captures the essence of marvelous realism:

sentí el vacío que se forma alrededor de un remolino, como si estuviera flotando dentro de un sueño, o flotando en la línea que divide dos aguas: de un lado los vivos, y las cosas normales que les ocurren todos los días; y del otro los muertos, y los fantasmas con los que nadie tiene que meterse, ni andar averiguando por qué hacen lo que hacen; mucho menos descubrirlos, soprenderlos en sus regresos a este mundo. (212)

Rather than negate or deny the marvelous component of her current reality, Yolanda accepts it as an alternative approach for understanding the verisimilitude of the situation.

As kindred spirits, Yolanda and Benjamin are both searching for a myth of origins—a myth that is joined by the common experience of orphanhood and antagonized
by the inexplicable mysteries of an indecipherable genealogy. Fraught with doubles, missing mothers, and unknown fathers, this genealogy is corrupted by the confusion of cyclical time and the loss of linearity. This is best expressed through the highly transient nature of the circus and the unusually ephemeral relationships that are born outside of its isolated community:

> la vida de la gente del circo es como la de los marineros, a veces pasan por un pueblo, los hombres se prendan de alguna muchacha, se enamoran mientras el circo está parado allí, y luego desmonta el romance, pero resulta que queda una semillita, algún hijo regado. (211)

Exposing the anti/genealogy that operates at its base, Yolanda speaks to the impossibility of origins and the impossibility of a traditional family unit in the circus. As a microcosm of the greater Caribbean, the circus is a space marked by plurality, a space in which the marvelous and the real coexist, a space that warps origins and renders family models obsolete, and finally, a space in which an adoptive community is privileged over biological kinship. The only model viable for withstanding the tricks and illusions of genealogical history, the adoptive community transforms the circus into a refuge for bodies in limbo.

*Nuestra señora de la noche*

Elizabeth’s Dancing Place serves a similar function as a shelter for the vulnerable and marginalized bodies of female sex workers in Mayra Santos-Febres’ *Nuestra señora de la noche*. Providing an adoptive community for young women who are supporting themselves and each other in the absence of a heteronuclear family, Elizabeth’s Dancing Place establishes a matrifocal matrix that depicts mothering through the “nonportrayal” of motherhood. I argue that this nonportrayal of motherhood offers a feminist portrayal of empowered mothering in which Santos-Febres navigates the less traveled waters of
maternal surrogacy. Mayra Santos-Febres fills her text with madrinas and othermothers while conflating the roles of madam and matriarch by eroticizing the female body and asking the polemic question, can a maternal body be a sexed body? Santos-Febres unpacks this question over the course of her novel and explicates the limitations of patriarchal motherhood through her protagonist, Isabel. When asked to elaborate on the separation between a woman and her reproductive responsibilities, Santos-Febres’ states:

Ahí estriba la tragedia de Isabel. Ella piensa que tiene que renunciar a ese hijo para realizarse. Luego la pena no la deja vivir y por eso, ‘sustituye’ al niño rechazado por Manolito. Pero aún así quiere encontrarlo, pedir perdón. El asunto es que este mundo está lleno de mujeres que crían a los hijos del otros. Está lleno de ‘madres de crianza’ de ‘madrinas.’ Pocas veces he visto que se trata el tema en literatura. Quise aproximarme a esa experiencia. (Santos-Febres 355)

With intentions of approaching the diverse experiences of mother/maternal figures that are often neglected in literature, Santos-Febres constructs her fragmented text around three distinct images of mothering that include the physically present, but emotionally absent biological mother, Christine Rangle, the virginal surrogate mother, María de la Candelaria Fresnet (Madrina Monserrat/La Vieja), and the improvised mother with/out child whose maternal roles span those of a madrina and a matriarch, Isabel. I would suggest that all three of these depictions contribute to the nonportrayal of motherhood for the following reasons: Christine’s alcoholism and emotional trauma practically erase her from the narrative, leaving her very little agency to voice the patriarchal violence that she has endured as the biological mother of the licenciado’s only legitimate son; Madrina Monserrat’s religious fetishism and stream of (crazed) consciousness diminish her credibility as a mother figure and often undermine the unconditional love and affection that she has for the licenciado’s illegitimate son—her ahijado, Roberto (whom she renamed Rafael); Isabel’s initial rejection of motherhood
and principle role as a madam—procuring the women that she mothers—countermands her maternal potential and excludes her from maternal discourse.

In both Montero’s and Santos-Febres’ texts, the history of abandonment repeats itself, as orphans reproduce orphans. Much like the women in Montero’s Son de Almendra, Isabel is characterized as a mother without child, literally and metaphorically scarred by the illegitimate birth and subsequent abandonment of her only biological kin. Isabel’s motives for abandoning her son—the product of her illicit love affair with Fornaris—are alluded to but ultimately left undefined. Over the course of herstory, Isabel’s reasoning seems to waver between feminist ambitions and patriarchal limitations: does Isabel abandon her child in feminist protest against patriarchal motherhood or does she reject him as a symbolic surrender to the patriarchal society that promotes the impossibility of a sexed mother? In an effort to become an emancipated woman—a property owner and successful entrepreneur—Isabel rejects the prospect of mothering her own child in fear of hampering her independence and independent wealth. Although her dreams reveal a feminist design, Isabel should not be regarded as a full-fledged feminist; her feminist ambitions are bound to the success of her brothel, the epicenter of male desire and the hub for trafficking female prostitutes.

Historically, “Prostitutes formed a subterranean counter-society, an explicit moral, social, sanitary, and political threat. They symbolized disorder, excess, pleasure, and improvidence” (Gilfoyle 121). As a threat to social order, sanitation, and hygiene, prostitutes were cast to the margins of society where their bodies were consumed for sex and castigated for deviance. As a profound source of anxiety in patriarchal cultures, prostitution ascertains the intersection of sexuality, gender, race, and class while weaving
together the rhetorics of (dis)honor and (im)morality. Although the history of prostitution in Puerto Rico dates back to the sixteenth century (Vázquez Lazo 40), prostitution as a cause for concern didn’t surface in national discourse until the nineteenth century.71 In conjunction with San Juan’s developing naval port, the migration of unmarried male laborers and young impoverished women to the island of Puerto Rico provoked a surge in transience and transgression that would increase the visibility of prostitution during the nineteenth century (Briggs 58). Following Europe’s discursive trends, Puerto Rico’s government adopted the language of hygiene and sanitation in order to police sexed female bodies and regulate sexual activity on the island. As victims of the very heavy patriarchal gaze, female prostitutes of the nineteenth century were considered unfit members of hegemonic society and thus rendered social exiles, quarantined to specific spaces deemed appropriate for their kind.72 Because space was “the main axis along which women’s bodies and the practice of prostitution were regulated, restricted, and controlled” (Rangelova 255), prostitutes were likened to the status of slaves, prohibited from moving freely through the city and segregated from the island’s dominant social spheres.73 Deemed unfit to fulfill the “respectable” female models of wife and mother propagated by the patriarchal standards of la gran familia puertorriqueña, prostitutes were forced to forge bonds among themselves, caring for each other and their illegitimate children within the segregated spaces of prostitution. Giving rise to the literary stereotype

71 Vázquez Lazo’s research locates the first historical reference to prostitution in Puerto Rico in a document from 1526 in which the Spanish monarch Carlos I grants the island permission to open a brothel (40).
72 According to Briggs, “The institution of the segregated district for prostitutes also immediately followed the abolition of slavery, and was part of an extensive system of limiting the movements of free laborers, black and white” (58). She goes on to explain that by the 1890s, San Juan’s female population was predominantly black or mixed race (58).
73 Rangelova cites the 1890 Reglamento de Higiene Pública as a divisive framework that separated prostitutes into three categories based on their housing and sexual practices (255). An extensive outline of the Reglamento is provided in Vázquez Lazo’s text, Meretrices: La prostitución en Puerto Rico de 1876 a 1917.
commonly known as the hooker with a heart of gold, this intersection of prostitution and motherhood exemplifies the profound irony of the hypersexed (immoral) matriarch.

The triumphs and tribulations of Isabel’s matriarchy overlap at Elizabeth’s Dancing Place—a paradoxical space that offers young women asylum from the very patriarchal violence that they are selling. Although the girls of Elizabeth’s Dancing Place don’t have access to heteropatriarchal family, they do have access to each other. Unlike the last two novels that I discussed, the adoptive community in this text is not born out of habitus. Instead, the act of *kinning* is performed on a stage of improvisation in which *muchachas* become *madrinas* and *madrinas* become matriarchs. The girls are not bound to each other by the behavioral or cultural inheritance of habitus, but by the shared experience of selling their sexed female bodies. I would like to note that the proliferation of Elizabeth’s Dancing Place—like that of biogenetic kinship—is based on sexual exchange. In the case of Elizabeth’s, however, the sexual exchange between the girls and their male clients is based on pleasure rather than procreation. For that reason, this fictive kinship, unlike its biogenetic counterpart, is rooted in the shared or affiliated experience of selling sex in order to survive.

Relegated to the margins of maternal discourse, Isabel, like several of her *ahijadas*, falls victim to the plight of the prostitute/mother that Ruth Panofsky explores in her work on the social and moral implications of a maternal sex worker. Panofsky states,

> The prostitute is tolerated as long as she serves the sexual needs of men. When she dares to become a mother and thereby an agent who must act independently, in the interests of herself and her child, she defies communal standards for sex workers. (Panofsky 100)

In other words, the sexed body giving birth is not only an anomaly, but also an “unsanctioned moral trespass” that prohibits the accommodation of the prostitute/mother
in life and literature (Panofsky 100). Is it for this reason that Isabel abandons her only biological child at birth and la Morena bleeds to death during labor? As women trapped in a limbo between the institutions of motherhood and prostitution, both Isabel and la Morena are denied the opportunity to mother their own children as socially integrated maternal prostitutes.

Santos-Febres’ expounds the social dilemmas of a maternal prostitute by including the patriarchal perspective of Isabel’s conservative Catholic foil—the Irish Bishop, Gerald MacManus. Determined to destroy Isabel and her thriving brothel, the Bishop dedicates his Sunday sermons to patriarchal propaganda in which women are portrayed as the family’s moral compass and the culprit of male transgression:

La mujer debe ser cuna de virtud, espejo de moral, sostén de la familia. Esposas, ayuden a sus maridos a no desviarse por las sendas de la carne. Maridos, sean fieles a sus esposas y a las promesas que hicieron de rendirles el respeto que les deben. (289)

Advocating for la gran familia, Bishop MacManus indirectly stigmatizes the sexed female body by unleashing a discourse of morality that is ingrained in his conceptualization of womanhood and motherhood.

Isabel ultimately defies the mother/prostitute predicament by mothering Manolín, la Morena’s illegitimate product of prostitution. Highly reminiscent of Isabel’s own experience with childbirth, la Morena’s labor is painted as a scene of subjection in which a child resulting from self-sexploitation is brought into the world under devastating and tragic circumstances. As Caroline Rody explains in Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History, the repeated scene of childbirth becomes a “signature trope for contact with the historical origins” that doubles as a code for women’s historical trauma:
If normative history is a woman giving birth, then instances of child birth gone awry, of the deaths of mother or child, of mother-child separation, or of a woman’s refusal of childbearing become tropes for the entrance of ‘bad history’ into women’s lives, for female resistance to history and for authorial inheritance of a traumatic past. (Rody 7)

Considering the notions of “bad history” that Rody delineates here in conjunction with the model of Hansen’s “bad mother” or “mother without child” discussed earlier, I contend that Santos-Febres is writing towards a third wave revisionist narrative that reclaims this badness as an infraction that promotes maternal improvisation. *Nuestra señora de la noche* operates as a genealogy of the improvisational mothers that are conceived through scenes of subjection. Echoing Donette Francis’ assertion that scenes of subjection are connected to subject formation (*Fictions* 6), I would suggest that these pained scenes of childbirth (Isabel and la Morena’s) are precisely what transform Isabel from a madam into a matriarch. Although Isabel attempts to use logical (patriarchal) reasoning to reject la Morena’s son—telling herself and the girls that Elizabeth’s is no place to raise a child—she ultimately falls victim to her own maternal instinct:

> cuando tomó a Manolín en los brazos y lo vio con aquella Mirada que tenía desde nacido, como buscando dónde anclarse, Isabel no pudo decidirse. Otra voluntad se le fue coagulando entre las manos, entre los brazos que sostenían a Manolín pequeñito con sus manitas agarrándole los anulares. Decidió quedarse con él… (294)

Isabel’s spontaneous decision to raise Manolín stems from a potpourri of reasons that all lead back to guilt. Just as Isabel serves as a surrogate mother for Manolito, Manolito serves as a surrogate son for Isabel, filling the maternal void imprinted in the scar that cuts across her abdomen. As an improvised matriarch, Isabel executes a balancing act in which she successfully wields power over her male clients while raising Manolín and
nurturing “las chicas, las pupilas/ahijadas/protegidas” (23) who cohabit Elizabeth’s Dancing Place.

Elizabeth’s Dancing Place engenders a revised matrifocal matrix that incorporates the improvised roles of othermothers, madrinas, and madams. This matrifocal matrix of improvised mothering, or kinning, mobilizes the women of the brothel into an adoptive community that threatens the male dominated institutions of la gran familia, the Church, and the state. According to Alexander,

Women’s sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideology of an originary nuclear heterosexual family that perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation. (Pedagogies of Crossing 22)

As the pillar of the adoptive community, the sexed female body offers a critical counterpoint to the image of the Virgen negra, niño blanco interspersed throughout the novel. While the Virgen negra, niño blanco signals the intricate pattern of othermothering that overhauls la gran familia in Santos-Febres’ text, the image of the maternal prostitute underscores Alexander’s notion of “erotic autonomy” by illustrating the ways in which a woman can perform maternal roles on the fringes of patriarchal society and in the absence of paternal figures.

Over the course of her novel, Santos-Febres demonstrates how female characters like Isabel la Negra are regarded as sociocultural anomalies merely because their caretaking capabilities are confounded with or compromised by their sexual deviancy. By portraying Isabel la Negra as a hypersexed matriarch or maternal prostitute, Santos-Febres is talking back to a long polemic history of prostitution that criminalizes women for decisions that were made out of logic or desperation. Even though Santos-Febres is
critiquing this historical criminalization, she is—on some level—reinforcing it. At the end of the novel, Isabel la Negra is killed as an innocent bystander in an act of violence that proves typical in and around Ponce’s social margins. As a consequence of the environment to which she is bound, Isabel’s death reveals her social instability as well as the provisional nature of mothering on the margins, both of which hint at the untenable family model. By integrating Isabel la Negra—a prostituting matriarch—into her literature, Santos-Febres is rescuing prostitution from the historical marginalization that it has endured for centuries.  

**Conclusion**

In their departure from the traditional models of kinship and the patriarchal institution of motherhood, all three novels discussed above portray the mobilization of othermothering as an improvised reaction or response to motherhood in crisis. Just as Khalo’s self-portrait, *Raices*, intimates the irony of the mother without child, these novels problematize the limitations of biological motherhood and redefine maternity through a feminist lens. Showcasing the prevalence of dismemberment and rupture in the female imaginary, Khalo’s self-portrait accommodates alternative meanings and methods of mothering that eloquently pun on the entanglement of nature and nurture. Playing a profound role in the novels discussed above, nature and nurture complicate heteronormative kinship by disputing the value of biology in the familial equation.

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74 In addition to *Nuestra señora de la noche*, Santos-Febres’ texts *Sirena Selena*, *Fe en disfraz*, and “Resinas para Aurelia” offer explicit commentaries on prostitution and sexual transgressions. While *Sirena Selena* looks at prostitution through the lenses of transvestism and trans-Atlantic jinetería (sexual tourism), “Resinas para Aurelia” unpacks the “ancient links between the prostitute, rotting flesh, corpses, and filth” (Corbin quoted in Gilfoyle 119).
While not exclusive to the Caribbean, the tropes of orphanhood, dismemberment, and othermothering are certainly endemic in the post-slave societies and miscegenated literary traditions of Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean. The literary prominence of these tropes stems from a desire to redress and revise the unsustainable heteronuclear family model in order to create one that accommodates illegitimate children and orphans. As an alternative to complete abandonment or the Latin American tradition of padrinos, the adoptive community in these Caribbean texts mimics the nurture and support of a stable family structure much like the “community among ourselves,” a sociocultural practice rooted firmly in the legacy of slavery:

‘Community among ourselves’ is an articulation of an ideal and a way of naming the networks of affiliation that exist in the context of difference, disruption, and death. The significance of becoming or belonging together in terms other than those defined by one’s status as property, will-less object, and the not-quite human should not be underestimated. (Hartman 61)

As a retention of slavery, this improvised family model, much like the adoptive community that I describe throughout this chapter, offers membership to those that have been dismembered from families and society alike. As a process of redress, this act of “re-membering” symbolizes a “knitting together of individual bodies that have been ideologically and physically objectified, fragmented, or shattered” in the wake of genealogical destruction (Freeman 303).

In the case of Del amor y otros demonios, García Márquez narrates practical kinship through the cultural inheritance of blackness and Africanity. Rescuing Sierva María’s defenseless body from the anti-genealogical limbo suspending her between whiteness and blackness, orphanhood and adoption, the black slave women of her father’s city palace and the convent of Santa Clara ground the metaphorical mulata in the
therapeutic threshold of their care. The liminal spaces of the slave quarters and kitchen offer a stage upon which relationships are performed and the matrifocal matrix is recovered. Over the course of Yolanda’s narrative in *Son de Almendra*, Montero contrives a comparable adoptive community schema within the subcultural space of the circus. In doing so, Montero demonstrates how easy it is to debunk a myth of origins that is not rooted in a stable kinship structure. By exposing the vulnerability and fragility of the traditional nuclear family model, Montero signifies on the instantaneous disfigurement of Yolanda’s genealogical identity. The improvisational nature of the matrifocal matrix that unfolds within the space of the adoptive community is explored in Santos-Febres’ *Nuestra señora de la noche*. Moving away from the transmission of habitus and cultural inheritance, Santos-Febres approaches the tropes of maternal subject formation and improvised mothering through scenes of subjection. As an anti-genealogy, the adoptive community becomes the only reliable replacement for the kinship structures and myths of origin that have been distorted by maternal dismemberment, the confusion of crossed bloodlines, and patriarchal violence committed against marginalized female bodies. In the following chapter, I take the performative aspects of kinship one step further and look at music as a vehicle for *kinning* in Spanish Caribbean literature.
Chapter 4. Breaking the Violence of Silence: Reading Music in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and *Bachata del ángel caído*

The drum knows the mystery of pain, of life and death, because it has been extracted from the forest with the axe.  
-Yoruba proverb

Figure 3. Rafael Tufiño. “Cortaron a Elena” in *Plenas*. 1955. Printed etching. 32 x 60 cm. Colección Puertorriqueña, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras.

On May 18, 1955, San Juan’s newspaper, *El Mundo* released a review of the book, *Plenas*(1955)—a polyglot text that archives the plurality of Puerto Rico’s national music genre.\(^{75}\) As a polyglot compilation, *Plenas* combines the discrete languages of Spanish, music, and visual art without privileging one over the other. Moreover, the

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\(^{75}\) The article entitled “Homer y Tifun: Pintores Publican Libro Sobre Plena” was written by *El Mundo* journalist Malen Rojas Daporta.
polyglossia of this text reflects the polyphony of its title subject: the plena. Dedicated to the beloved king of plena, Manuel Jiménez (Canario), the portfolio celebrates music as a cultural text, showcasing twelve popular plenas through their musical compositions, Spanish lyrics, and visual interpretations—intricate etchings by the young Puerto Rican painters, Lorenzo Homar and Rafael Tufiño. By translating the plena’s orality and folklore into a printed, published text, Homar and Tufiño validate popular culture through a medium of high culture, using the written word to accommodate the spoken vernacular and the melodies of music. In addition to a collection of plena inspired etchings, the portfolio includes an introduction on the origins of plena written by the Puerto Rican writer, Tomás Blanco. Subverting the canon and preserving one of Puerto Rico’s most valuable cultural artifacts, Plenas speaks to the once novel concept of fusing music and literature while addressing the process of recording or archiving a collective cultural memory.

Extracted from Plenas, the image above memorializes what is arguably Puerto Rico’s most popular plena, “Cortaron a Elena.” As legend has it, the plena’s title character Elena Sánchez—a local Ponce prostitute—was attacked by a jealous woman at a dance and subsequently rushed to the hospital in a chair (Amador de Jesús 256). Meticulously etched in the image above, this scene recalls a violent crime of passion that

76 Lorenzo Homar was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico on Sept. 10, 1913 (Méndez-Méndez 222). A renowned engraver and graphic artist, Homar worked in New York as an apprentice designer at the House of Cartier and studied at the Pratt Institute in the late 1930s (222). After serving in the United States Army, Homar returned to Puerto Rico and continued his career in art. Rafael Tufiño, “Painter of the People,” was born to Puerto Rican parents in Brooklyn, New York on Oct. 30, 1922 (Lavietes 1). At the age of 10, Tufiño moved to Old San Juan, Puerto Rico to live with his grandmother (1). After serving in the United States Army, Tufiño studied art in Mexico, where he gained exposure to muralismo and eventually became a famed muralist himself (1). Before publishing Plenas with Homar, Tufiño painted the monumental mural “La Plena” celebrating the twelve subject plenas of the aforementioned text. Along with Julio Rosado del Valle and René Marqués, Homar and Tufiño co-founded the celebrated Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño (CAP) in 1950. As members of Generación del Cincuenta, both artists dedicated their careers to the construction of an aesthetic identity for their isalnd (Lavietes 1).
offers a patriarchal critique of prostitution and female citizenship by explicitly outlining the “plebian parameters of proper sexuality, motherhood, and familial relations” (Amador de Jesús 256). The song’s title phrase and repeated verse “corarton a Elena” highlights the prevalence of corporeal violence and vulnerability while hinting at the possibility of Elena’s physical and metaphorical dismemberment. The slashes that Elena’s volatile body sustains symbolize her sexed body’s amputation from mainstream, dominant society. Although Elena is cut off from society, she remains attached to her loving mother, who is depicted in the second stanza:

Su madre lloraba
¡Cómo no iba a llorar!
Si era su hijita querida
Y se la llevaron al hospital.

Elena’s crying mother reclaims her daughter’s honor by upholding the traditional responsibilities associated with motherhood: “because the mother figure is separated from street life and leisure, Elena is redeemed from a completely disreputable ending” (Amador de Jesús 256). In addition to its intricate detail and accurate depiction of the plena, “Cortaron a Elena,” the image above is especially apropos because of the fact that it was etched, not drawn. Paralleling the ways that music and history are inscribed onto the literary bodies that I discuss in this chapter, this etching inscribes a painful history of violence onto Puerto Rico’s national imaginary and collective memory.

This chapter looks at the roles of music in *Sirena Selena* by Santos-Febres and *Bachata del ángel caído* (1999) by Antonio Valdez. I argue that music, like dismemberment, becomes a site of memory, an open wound that allows characters to approach an individual or collective past that was previously suppressed by the psyche or repressed by the hegemony. Additionally, I maintain that music extricates Elaine Scarry’s
notion of “unspeakability” from emotional and physical suffering, lending a performative aspect to the act of building a fictive kinship, or *kinning*. In this chapter, I use the collective and performative nature of music to challenge Scarry’s argument that physical pain achieves an “unsharability” that resists and ultimately destroys language (4). In turn, I posit that music recuperates the language that was lost in the throes of physical and psychological pain, articulating the most inarticulate elements of trauma. I concur with Hartman’s assertion that “the significance of the performative” lies in its “creating a context for the collective enunciation of this pain” (Hartman 51). By offering pain a voice via music, the amputated memory of trauma is revisited and redressed in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there. It is a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as a mode of testimony and memory. (Hartman 73)

I find this notion of the phantom limb to be very fitting here given the highly sensorial experience that is attached to corporeal nature of music.

Much like the “phantom limb” metaphor that Hartman proposes in relation to the memory that is activated “at the site of rupture,” Ángel Quintero Rivera’s “*música mulata*” offers an alternative way of approaching the politics of memory and remedying the epistemic violence wrought upon the Caribbean subject. Although the term “*música mulata*” evokes memories of a specific “ethnic-racial” history while signifying on the genealogy of Latin American musical traditions, Quintero Rivera affirms that the term is not meant to underscore the mixed musical features and miscegenated composition of traditions that were born during the defining moments of transculturation. Instead, Quintero Rivera develops his concept around the “irreversible processes” of distribution and expression that affect a genre:
No concentraré mi análisis en los trasfondos (‘los genes’), sino en su (‘termo’) dinámica, en los ‘procesos irreversibles’ de su conformación y expresión: en los procesos sociohistóricos que fueron marcando las maneras en que los trasfondos se combinaron, y las expresiones sonoras novedosas que fueron surgiendo en—y más allá de—las combinaciones. (71)

Within the Caribbean context, music serves as a counter-episteme that, according to Quintero Rivera, predates the bodies of knowledge and discourse that were transplanted on to Caribbean soil:

En el Caribe antes del verbo fue el tambor, el ritmo, y el movimiento. En situaciones problemáticas de ‘encuentros’ entre ‘migrantes’ de diversas lenguas, la música y el baile antecedieron a los primeros ‘discursos. (Quintero Rivera 14)

Finally, I analyze how music in these novels serves as a vehicle for performing kinship within the space of the text itself and within the confines of a literary genealogy. According to Roberto González Echevarría’s essay “Literature of the Hispanic Caribbean,” “Hispanic Caribbean literature seeks legitimation through a return to a dark mother whose memory is in music, and whose access is encoded in rhythm and melody” (17). To bolster this statement, González Echevarría argues that the most important characteristic of Hispanic Caribbean literature “is the conception of a syncretic social myth giving a sense of national and regional identity, a myth whose outward manifestation is popular music “(17). While underscoring the marriage between literature and popular music that González Echevarría identifies in his conceptualization of a collective identity, I offer a close reading of the musical traditions and lyrical excerpts that each novel deploys in order to critique and construct a national, regional, and/or personal identity.

In the 1970’s, West Indian literature started exploring popular music as an alternative literary frontier that provided anticolonial writers a vehicle for moving away
from the colonial sphere and the values that it propagated. According to Dalleo, shifting away from the colonial sphere signaled a departure from the institutionalized canon. Writers started moving toward the widely accessible reserve of popular music in an effort to flesh out the postcolonial crisis and capture “a better expression of the subaltern nation, less implicated in elite upper-class institutional formations” (Dalleo 202). Fusing the lowbrow realm of music with the highbrow domain of literature provided a transgressive and revolutionary strategy for approximating popular culture and those participating in it. From Puerto Rican texts such as Luis Rafael Sánchez’ La guaracha del Macho Camacho (1976) and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s El entierro de Cortijo (1983) to Cuban works like Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s Ella cantaba boleros (1996), music revolutionized post-1960s Spanish Caribbean literature because it offered a popular voice and sociocultural lens for critiquing a specific historical moment in each island’s memory. By integrating a profound orality and musicality into their texts through lyrics, rhythms, popular themes, and performances, contemporary Caribbean authors destabilize a canonical tradition and “de-privilege literature, in particular by inverting its relationship with popular cultural forms such as music” (Dalleo 202). Because music serves as a mediated way of communicating (Quintero Rivera 20), its position in literature assists authors in depicting specific power dynamics that emerge from social relationships as well as one’s relationship to time and space. In the words of Quintero Rivera,

La música representa, pues, una forma en que las personas interactúan con su mundo; un intento de ejercer cierto control sobre su materialidad, sobre su biología, resignificando colectivamente uno de los elementos consustanciales a la existencia. Tiene, por lo tanto, en todas las sociedades una importancia enorme: una función decisiva en la configuración simbólica de lo social. (34)
Moreover, music, as a live dialogue, transcends the written word and contributes an additional or syncopated level of discourse that encapsulates both cognitive and critical perspectives.

Building a solid foundation for contemporary writers such as Mayra Santos-Febres, Pedro Antonio Valdez, and Mayra Montero, Sánchez, Juliá, and Cabrera Infante imagined music “as both popular (within the local setting) and marginal (in the global context)” (Dalleo 202) in order to navigate the “contaminated world of commercial culture and elitist conceptions of high literature” (206). In the texts that I analyze in this chapter, music surfaces as a popular, collective, and/or national articulation of an individual’s specific experience, history, and/or memory. Popular music infiltrates the written words of these texts just as it saturates the memories of the characters depicted. I suggest that the authors and characters under discussion are engaged in a practice of re-memory, an exercise of fleshing out traumatic memories by making them communal or collective property through music. Just as Paul Gilroy explicates in his essay, “One Nation Under a Groove,”

The contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora work within an aesthetic and political framework which demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves time and again to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable fact of their survival. (37)

In the pages that follow, I evaluate the distinct roles that various musical genres play in *Sirena Selena, Bachata del ángel caído,* and *Son de Almendra.* In *Sirena Selena* and *Bachata,* music is employed as a point of departure for discussing a genealogy or an archive of emotional memory, while *Son de Almendra* deploys a continuous reference to the famous danzón, “Almendra,” in order to contextualize a specific moment in the
collective imagination of a nation and the individual imagination of Montero’s protagonist.

*Sirena Selena vestida de pena*

Santos-Febres’ novel, *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, offers a chorus of diverse voices and plural perspectives that facilitate the reader’s migration through refracted depictions of time and space. The novel is a multi-layered performance in itself, gracefully demonstrating the ways in which its complicated characters are performing gender, performing boleros, and performing kinship simultaneously. The compilation of each diva’s presence and performance allows one to read the novel as a fragmented cabaret, a poly-performative work in which the songs, acts, and costumes contribute to a syncopation of experiences and dialogues. Famous for singing the boleros that his grandmother taught him as a child, Sirenito adapts the oral and musical rituals of his own memories to construct his alter ego and present persona, Sirena Selena. Sirena Selena is only fully realized when Martha Divine discovers the pubescent wonder singing nostalgic boleros in the dark urban alleys of Puerto Rico. Delivering a rich, matrifocal genealogy of othermothering, the boleros serve as a connective tissue that binds Sirenito/Selena to his/her adoptive community over the course of the novel.

As one of Latin America’s most popularized and exported musical traditions, the bolero is emblematic of the Spanish Caribbean’s miscegenated memory. As a transculturated derivative of the early Spanish peninsular bolero transplanted in the Americas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Cuban bolero originated in Santiago de Cuba during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Torres 43). The

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77 José “Pepe” Sanchez is recognized as the musician behind the first Cuban bolero, “Tristezas,” written in 1885 (Torres 43).
Cuban bolero was a musical product of its environment, reflecting the polyglossia and multiculturalism of Caribbean microcosms that were populated by peoples of African, European, and Chinese descent. Even though it shares a name with its peninsular predecessor, the Cuban bolero actually bears a stronger musical resemblance to the Cuban *contradanza* and *danzón* (Torres 43). By the 1920s, the Cuban bolero had accumulated a wider audience across Latin America, namely in Mexico, where the genre had been introduced by traveling Cuban troupes in the Yucatan Peninsula (Torres 44). Quickly integrating itself into Mexico’s post-revolutionary sociocultural fabric, the bolero adapted to the guitar-based duos and trios that dominated the genre’s “golden age” lasting from the 1930s to 1960 (44). Although the romantic trio gained popularity across the American border, the solo bolero continued to flourish as the pivotal antecedent to salsa as “ballad song” (Torres 46). Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, younger generations and queer subcultures across the Caribbean and Latin America, specifically Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, started reappropriating the bolero tradition.

In her foundational text, *El bolero: historia de un amor*, Iris Zavala locates the origins of the bolero on the body and draws attention to the modernist values that are highlighted by the genre’s lyrics and language. Emerging in conjunction with modernism at the end of the nineteenth century, the bolero approached the politics of desire through the eroticized expressions of seduction and the Parnassian language of love (Zavala 29). According to Zavala,

> El mundo amatorio del bolero se apoya en la homologías (como todo discurso amoroso) y desplaza un espejo en el que se reproduce una estructura dual: tú y yo. Si volvemos a la letra de los boleros conocidos desde la década de 1915-1920, las princesas y otros personajes de la fauna y flora modernista, tal los cisnes, *ersatz* de la mujer desnuda, apenas encubren la referencia erótica. (29)
In addition to these modernist expressions of desire, Zavala identifies a Hegelian dynamic of desire that introduces a discourse of otherness in boleros: “en el bolero el tema hegeliano fundamental reaparece: que el deseo del ser humano es el deseo del otro. Y claro, de formas confusas, el deseo se capta en el otro, y aparecen la rivalidad, la competencia, los celos” (36). Vanessa Knights underscores the importance of the Other as well and contends that

the bolero speaks the language of desire, of its absence and presence, of illusion and disillusionment and is therefore not so much about love or pleasure, but about a desire that by definition is impossible to realize: the pursuit of the unattainable other. (Knights 84)

As an organizing theme of Santos-Febres’ novel, the desire for the Other is precisely what inspires and undermines Selena’s success.

As Debra Castillo so aptly points out in her article, “She Sings Boleros: Santos-Febres’ Sirena Selena,” Selena’s plight parallels that of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Mermaid* (Castillo 14), a fantastic creature searching for a sense of belonging in an aquatic world that cannot facilitate the realization of her terrestrial dreams and desires. After saving the life of a shipwrecked prince, the Little Mermaid sacrifices her voice and seafaring soul for a human body and identity. With hopes of winning the prince’s heart, the mute Little Mermaid is exiled from her aquatic community and ultimately left heartbroken when the prince marries a princess. Like the Little Mermaid, it is precisely Sirenito’s voice that grants him access to a new identity and an unknown world, extracting him from the slums of his Puerto Rican reality and catapulting him into the fabulous realm of Dominican divadom. Within this realm, deception reigns and Sirenito’s delicate male body is transformed into a stage for Selena’s seduction. As the incarnation of limbo, Selena’s body oscillates somewhere in between beauty and monstrosity:
“Martha disipaba la gula y la sopresa ante el tamaño genital de su ahijadita. Asombrada, no se podía explicar cómo de un cuerpito tan frágil y delgado colgara semejante guindalejo” (48). With the fragility and delicacy of a young girl and the anatomy of a grown man, Selena personifies the very enigma of her body. Because of her corporeal duplicity, Selena is elevated to an indescribable creature that exists outside of human/bodily discourse: “Quería mirar de cerca a aquella criatura, aquel ángel caído, aquel perfil de niña marimacha, delicadamente hecho, que entre las penumbras del bar brillaba con luz propia” (50). Through the practice of gender bending, Selena’s material body is transformed into what De Ferrari calls a phantasmic presence:

Not only can [the material body] not be conceived of as outside of language and culture; it is also inevitably caught in one or more systems of value. While the relation between body and identity has always had political significations, these depend precisely on what social and natural truths the relation between body and identity is assumed to generate at any given time. (9)

As a linguistic and cultural anomaly, Selena’s indecipherable body-identity (gender) transcends transvestism and the taxonomical matrix, forcing her into a category of “other” that is best conceived via boleros. In *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*, Frances Aparicio maintains, “Like any other sociomusical practice, the bolero, as cultural text, is also open to regenderings and productions of meaning that move well beyond the heterosexist boundaries implicit in their authorship and lyrics” (Aparicio 138). As a vehicle for crossing a multitude of borders, which range in nature from those that are transnational to those that are socially constructed, boleros enable Selena’s movement between islands, classes, and genders.

According to Quiroga, “Boleros play with a border where masculinities and femininities are to be seen in ways that do not necessarily correspond to the ways gender
acts out in the public sphere” (Quiroga 155). Familiar with crossing borders, Sirena Selena is a Caribbean body in motion, accustomed to the movement so often depicted through the recurring theme of migration intimated in boleros. According to Quintero Rivera, the bolero tradition resurrects a history of migration that marked Latin American and the Caribbean at the turn of the twentieth century (304). As people migrated from rural towns to city centers, a specifically Latin American music started to develop as folkloric traditions encountered popularized forms (Quintero Rivera 304). As a “música mulata,” the bolero genre stems from the profound hybridization of transcultural contact, which Quintero Rivera explains in the following excerpt:

El bolero combinó el protagonismo de la canción (fortalecido tanto por el formato inicial del disco, como por los marineros, y exhibiendo considerable desarrollo entre los migrantes italianos en Buenos Aires), el ritmo afrocaribeño (popularizado sobre todo desde Cuba) y el acompañamiento guitarrero de toda la ruralía latinoamericana, logrando niveles de expresión íntima personal en un género a la vez lírico y bailable. (304)

I would argue then that the genre’s migrant history is encoded in Selena’s transnational migration and globalized dreams of becoming a famous performer in New York City.

Whether moving through the hands of othermothers or traveling across transnational borders, Selena’s body—existing outside of a recorded genealogy and stable kinship structure—is further complicated by its illegible gender, which in turn enhances the body’s performative value or identity. In congruence with Benítez-Rojo’s argument that the Caribbean body is in itself a performance, Mayra Santos-Febres constructs her novel and title character, Sirena Selena, around the trope of performativity,

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78 Quiroga furthers his discussion of the relationship between borders and boleros stating, Bolero performances deploy and reconstruct borders. The first border is that of the stage. To sing a bolero (always at the moment of despair) implies erasing the subject: the abandoned, plaintive, destitute, defiant, rebellious, or intransigent subject, always engaging in the shared memory of a loss, reconstructed because of its very sense of ruin. (155)
using the hybridized musical genre of boleros as a means of recalling and communicating memory in both individual and collective contexts. Selena’s body becomes a stage upon which the illusions of gender, time, and emotion are performed and subsumed through the boleros of her childhood. In the words of Quiroga, “There is a feeling that bolero as a genre makes its own demands—one lives within the genre, one seduces it, one extracts the plaintive sentiment from it as if it were a kind of platonic body whose incarnation one assumes” (155). Seducing both the genre and her audience, Selena becomes a simulacrum of the bolero, a personification of the genre’s intimate elaborations of pain and suffering, love and lust, absence and separation, migration and displacement.

As an oral artifact, the boleros symbolize a living inheritance that immortalizes Sirenito’s late abuela. By honoring his abuela’s legacy through the memory of her beloved boleros, Sirenito spontaneously performs the rehabilitative act of kinning, binding himself to an expired genealogy and an imaginary kinship structure that memorializes his relationships of the past while inspiring relationships for the future. As a young boy, Sirenito learns that his angelic, siren-like voice is in fact a genetic trait inherited from his missing mother: “Tienes una voz hermosa, muchachito del cielo. Que Dios te la bendiga. Igualita a la de tu madre, que si no se hubiera perdido, sería hoy por hoy una cantante de primera…Tu madre cantaba como los ángeles” (41). Although she was destined to be a singing sensation after winning a talent contest on a local television station, Sirenito’s mother is never fully realized as a star; her existence as a songstress evaporates much like her presence in Sirenito’s life. Just as his grandmother builds a

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79 Recently joining the ancestors, Sirenito’s grandma symbolizes the presence of an elder, much like Toni Morrison describes in her foundational essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.” With regard to black literature, Morrison states, “There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343).
genealogy for Sirenito through the family’s innate vocal talent (“Además, eso viene de familia” (41)), Sirenito builds an adoptive community for himself by singing boleros. Consequently, the emergence of boleros simultaneously activates the rehabilitative performance of *kinning* that binds characters to one another in moments of desperation and/or desire. In moments of desperation or profound scenes of subjection, Sirenito’s singing habits double as an act of *kinning* that binds him to his adoptive community of the past while simultaneously forging an adoptive community for the future.

Abandoned by his mother and raised by his grandmother, the fragile adolescent, Sirenito, is left orphaned and despondent following his grandmother’s death. Desperate to avoid the orphanages of Social Services following his tragic loss, Sirenito survives collecting bottles and turning tricks in the back alleys of San Juan, Puerto Rico until he is “adopted” by the nurturing *draga*, Valentina Frenésí. As the most convincing *draga* on the corner, Valentina (La Tina) rescues Sirenito from the depths of orphanhood and despair by simultaneously performing femininity and motherhood:

> Valentina Frenésí fue, como quien dice, su primera madre. O mejor, su hermana mayor. Tina, le apodaban en la calle. Fue quien la quiso cuando aún ella no era la Sirena. La cuidó poco después de que muriera su abuela, cuando había visto cómo se la llevaban en una ambulancia a la morgue, cuando lloró pensando en el entierro que nunca le iba a poder dar, cómo los huesos de su abuela estarían por siempre dando tumbos por el mundo, deambulantes, perdidos. (78)

Providing Sirenito with performative kinship in the crucial moments following the loss of his grandmother, La Tina fills a maternal void by adopting the plural roles of a mother-

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80 Sirenito’s grandmother provides an extensive genealogy of her family in a flashback that Selena recalls during her stay in the Dominican Republic. During this flashback (later referred to as a dream), *abuela* shares memories of her family, a patriarchal institution dominated by her overbearing father, shamed mother, boisterous brothers and her three sisters: Crucita, the lesbian—“medi machorra” (153), Finín, the prostitute—“puta de verdad” (150), and Angela, the married mother of many children who emigrated to New York with her husband (151).

81 In contextualizing Sirenito’s orphanhood, Santos-Febres makes no mention of his father and merely refers to his late grandmother, lost uncles, and missing mother: “Tíos muertos, emigrados al extranjero. Madre en paradero desconocido” (9).
savior: “Yo te saqué de la basura y te salve de morirte, que es lo mismo que parirte, así que no porfíes” (90). In addition to providing Sirenito with the life lessons and emotional support he needs to survive, La Tina serves as a caretaker, nursing Sirenito’s broken body back to life after a brutal attack that ends in rape: “Valentina lo atendió después del accidente, lo oyó repetir tonadas de boleros viejos de los que cantaba su abuela, quejumbroso. Valentina Frenesi la quiso como nadie y le enseñó a sobrevivir” (78). It is important to take note of the fact that Sirenito’s rape is referred to as an accident (“su accidente”), which further emphasizes the unspeakability of the act of rape and the traumatic impression that it left on the psyche. By reverting to boleros as a vehicle for consoling himself and communicating the intense physical pain and violation of his unspeakable trauma, Sirenito creates a living, oral archive where there would otherwise be an invisible graveyard of dead memories. As Ann Cvetkovich explains in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*:

> Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma pits pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. (7)

By speaking the unspeakable, Sirenito is actively archiving his memories in an effort to voice the pain and liberate the trauma from the confines of his own psyche. This becomes a habit that Sirenito carries with him through his transformation into the stunning diva, Sirena Selena. Given the traumatic circumstances and profound loss that Sirenito endures as an adolescent, it is not surprising that the trappings of divadom comfort his alter ego, Sirena Selena. By sharing her emotions with an audience, Selena
exorcises and translates her individual trauma into a collective experience by engaging the audience in an emotional, interpersonal dialogue. Transcending time, space, and persona, boleros allowed Sirenito to access emotional memory spontaneously just as they let Selena recall emotional memory on command in her performing present.

Serving as a contextual compass in scenes that are fraught with uncertainty and mixed-emotions, boleros define the emotional environment and translate feelings for the performers and the audience alike. In scenarios where the language of pleasure and/or pain is destroyed, Santos-Febres integrates boleros as a communicative consolation, offering a voice to that which is otherwise silenced or unspeakable. Throughout the novel, Santos-Febres underscores the coexistence of pleasure and pain, carefully depicting moments in which language is reduced to a representation of feelings, such as song lyrics or sound effects. Consider, for example, Sirenito’s sexual encounter with a “circumspect” customer:

Una noche, mientras un señor muy circunspecto le chupaba entre las piernas, el sireno empericado recordó un bolero entero de la abuela. Anteriormente, cuando la asaltaba la melancolía, tarareaba tonadas, cantaba pedacitos de coro, pero el bolero como tal se le escapaba, como si sufriera de un maleficio que le hacía olvidar las letras tan pronto le saltaba la entonación a la memoria. Sin embargo aquella noche, por la razón más inexplicable, recordó un bolero completo y, luego, otro, otro más…y no era que le gustara ninguna de aquellas canciones, era que las oía en su cabeza cantadas por la abuela. (Santos-Febres 92)

In this complicated scene of pleasure and subjection, Sirenito is overwhelmed by the memory of his grandmother’s boleros. Dominated by orality, this scene juxtaposes two oral sensations: Sirenito’s voice and the fellatio he is receiving. In both cases, the mouth is a symbolic aperture that communicates and consumes. The customer, who is quite literally sucking the songs out of the young siren, taps into a sensorial reserve, stimulating Sirenito’s previously inaccessible register. In this moment, Sirenito’s
memory bank is unlocked by the sensation of pleasure, which in turn counteracts his melancholic block and reactivates his musical memory.

As a form of catharsis, Sirenito’s singing habits function as a confession and commentary, permitting his repressed memories, emotions, and desires to surface. In the words of Quiroga,

Bolero refuses all that exists by mourning all that has been; its temporal mode is always the past—or of the past as a ruin. It works on the registers of defiance, nostalgia, anger, and lust; its geographical referents are a mental constellation of tropics that can be invented at will. (Quiroga 152)

Given the genre’s cathartic nature and temporal insistence on the often traumatic past, the boleros serve as an instrument of “rememory,” a term coined by Toni Morrison in her foundational novel, Beloved (1987). In her article on the role of “rememory” in Morrison’s work, Caroline Rody comments on the act of “disremembering” which complements and opposes the act or object of “rememory,” which “postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present” (101). Not to be confused with the verb dismember, which strikes close in spelling and meaning, “disremember” offers a compelling way of unpacking Selena’s desire to purge the painful memories of her past from the mouthpiece of her tortured psyche—her voice. In a prayer to the encantadora, María Piedra de Imán, Selena begs for her own memorial dismemberment, or rather, the ability to “disremember” by obtaining a fresh voice and a clean memory:

Poder cantar como si no hubiese pasado nada, como cuando era chiquito y tenía casa y familia. Había miseria…Pero éramos felices. No había que endiablarse, desesperarse, cantar para sobrevivir. Atacuñar toda la rabia en una canción, como diera lugar. Y ya no quiero, Piedra Imán, cantar así. Quiero cantar desde la boca nueva, como si naciera justo cuando me alumbre el reflector. Libre de recuerdos. (16)

According to syncretic tradition, María Piedra de Imán is an enchantress that brings fortune and good luck to those that pray to her. Affiliated with the seven Samaritans and the earth’s mineral, the magnet,
As a ritual of “rememory,” Selena’s singing boleros conjures a performativity akin to the limbo dance upon which Harris develops his theoretical framework for the West Indian limbo experience. Moreover, the dismemberment that is implicit in Harris’ construct of limbo is also tied to the notion of a phantom limb and the sensation of reattaching one’s self to a memory or experience, essentially re-membering bits and pieces of one’s self through a ritualized act of “rememory.” Echoing Pin-Chia Feng’s assertion that “The image of dismemberment succinctly summarizes the history of the African diaspora” (153), I contend that dismemberment embodies even more than that, encompassing the fragmented psychic process and shards of emotional memory that contribute to the continuous rebuilding of individual and collective identities in the Caribbean.

After the tragic overdose and subsequent death of his first “mother,” La Tina, the reader finds Sirenito consoling himself once again with the sentimental lyrics and melancholic melodies of the boleros that his grandmother taught him as a child. While reacquainting himself with homelessness and the dark urban streets of San Juan, Sirenito encounters the infamous draga and owner of the Danubio Azul nightclub, Martha Divine. With an impeccable eye and ear for identifying talent, Martha Divine recognizes Sirenito’s striking vocal capabilities and the potential profit that he yields: “—Tú cantas como los ángeles del cielo —le había dicho un día emocionada la Martha; un día que Selena recogía latas por los alrededores del Danubio y, casi sin darse cuenta, tarareaba un bolero de los de su abuela” (10). Once again, Selena is described in angelic

Maria Piedra de Imán is a powerful touchstone and protectress (Santos-Febres 15). As magnet and compass, María Piedra de Imán provides guidance and direction to those in need (15).

83 In addition to fulfilling plural roles as Selena’s adoptive mother and stage manager, Martha serves as the narrative’s “anchoring vision,” guiding the reader through narrative fragmentation as a “point of view character” (Castillo 23).
terms, which accentuates the otherworldliness of her voice in contrast to the excruciating pain and agony that it conveys:

Lo cantó a viva voz, lo cantó como si se fuera a morir cuando terminara de cantarlo, lo cantó para percatarse ella misma de su agonía, como un perro agonizante lo cantó, como un perro de raza, pero leproso, muriendo bajo una goma de carro recién desmantelado. (10)

Seduced by the dueling aspects of Sirenito’s voice, Martha Divine rescues the emotionally battered boy and gives birth to a budding star, Sirena Selena. Under the care and supervision of her new adoptive othermother, Selena learns to master the art of deception while perfecting her seduction of an audience and her personification of the boleros. Taming her talent for scheduled performances rather than spontaneous outbursts, Selena ontologizes her own experiences of pleasure and pain, absence and abandonment, melancholy and loss in order to be the emotion that she is singing.

As Selena’s othermother and stage manager, Martha Divine simultaneously nurtures and exploits the young star, hustling her across transnational borders and rigid class lines, ultimately (and unknowingly) providing her access to the wealthy Dominican hotelier, Hugo Graubel. After mastering the art of seductive deception, Sirena Selena metaphorically dismantles Martha’s home using all of Martha’s tools when she secretly cuts a deal with Graubel and abandons her at the hotel Conquistador. In spite of the personal initiative that she exercises in her seduction of Graubel, Selena is still pained by the fear of subjection—abandonment, abuse, and exploitation—during their shared moments of immense pleasure. In the words of Debra Castillo,

The dream of love is refracted through a performative matrix of frequently embittered and displaced desire, of phantasmic pleasures that mediate exchanges only at the level of artifice and image, and of forms of love all the more potent because of repeated experiences of disappointment or rejection. (22)
Selena’s heart-wrenching bolero performance at Graubel’s home successfully bundles her competing emotions while articulating the conflicting sentiments that she is experiencing.

It is important to note that Selena’s opening song choice, “Nave sin rumbo” conveys the emotional turmoil that she encounters during her stay in the hotelier’s private home:

Es mi corazón una nave en el turbulento mar,  
desafiando la fuerte tempestad  
de eso que llaman amor.

Tú, lobo de mar,  
hacia dónde esta nave haz de llevar,  
sin preocuparte apenas que rumbo tomaremos.

Dime capitán,  
tú conoces las aguas de este mar,  
si después de pasar la tempestad  
quedará sobre la calma  
un imenso vacío entre mis brazos,  
o tal vez un corazón hecho pedazos.

Es mi corazón…

A bolero originally composed by the Puerto Rican bolerista, Sylvia Rexach, “Nave sin rumbo” allegorizes love in terms of a nautical voyage, capturing the vulnerability and tumult of a romantic relationship. With respect to the literary context that Santos-Febres is musically scoring here, Selena’s heart proves to be as vulnerable as a ship in the turbulent sea, trying to defeat the storm of love that afflicts her torrid affair with the queer but married, Graubel. Overwhelmed by his desire and affection for her, the stunning chanteuse, Selena, looks to Graubel as a gentle but experienced captain that knows his way in and out of their relationship’s most dangerous waters. These lyrics are compelling not only in the way that they narrate Selena’s affair with Graubel, but also in the way that
they metaphorically transport Sirena Selena—empty and broken hearted—back to the waters that she came from, much like Andersen’s Little Mermaid. As the personification of a siren, Selena’s origins are located in the sea. When she is in love on land, however, she appears to be a fish out of water, compelled to flee the lover that tried to fish her out of limbo.

While one might read Selena’s independent deal with Graubel as an act of deception against her othermother and manager, I prefer to read it as an act of abandonment that reverses the trend of maternal desertion and loss that Selena experienced previously. After losing her biological mother, her grandmother, and La Tina, Selena disappears from Martha’s life before Martha has the chance to disappear from hers. Selena’s disappearance or erasure at the end of the novel further emphasizes her personification of the bolero:

Boleros are all about erasure. What other musical genres can be so invested in its own sense of disappearance that it seeks to proclaim absence by belting out songs claiming that the only thing that remains is disappearance itself? (Quiroga 152)

Although Selena escapes Graubel’s desire and Martha’s care, her presence in the novel is perpetuated by the story of the queer Dominican adolescent, Leocadio. As the protagonist of the peripheral narrative embedded in between Selena and Martha’s shifting perspectives, Leocadio is a gentle orphan that was abandoned, regretfully, by his mother who couldn’t provide for him and survive on the wages she was earning as a domestic employee. Made aware of his beauty and delicacy at a young age, Leocadio, like Selena, was often victimized by the unsolicited attention and harassment of male bullies and sexual predators. Once Doña Adelina adopts Leocadio and provides him the shelter of an adoptive community, he starts *kinning* with his *hermano* Migueles, who introduces him to
the queer subculture of sexual tourism. It is in this subcultural underworld that
Leocadio’s life intersects with that of Martha Divine. Mesmerized by his delicate beauty
and ambiguous sexuality, Martha observes Leocadio from a distance, hoping to fill the
void that Selena has left in her heart and her repertoire.

*Bachata del ángel caído*

While *Sirena Selena* offers a matrifocal genealogy of othermothering through the
relationships founded upon boleros, *Bachata del ángel caído* by Pedro Antonio Valdez
provides a genealogy of machismo through the organizing presence of bachatas.84 My use
of the word machismo here is meant to embody

The strong sense of masculinity, entailing aggressiveness, excessive virility,
and the domination of women...[that defines] the backbone of male self-
awareness as it is indoctrinated, with few exceptions, in the Dominican
Republic. (Brown 88)

Implicit in this definition of machismo is an image of courtship that is dependent on the
act of conquest, that is, a heroic male’s ability to conquer the female object of his
affection (Brown 88). Over the course of the novel, Valdez approaches a national
(popular) identity that is entrenched in the emotions and values propagated by bachata.
Set in the impoverished barrio of Riito, the novel depicts rampant drug use, domestic
violence, illicit sexual affairs, divine miracles, and quotidian misogyny in a patriarchal
society. Abandoning linear time, Valdez guides his reader through the literary enterprise
and hallucinogenic adventures of the naïve but pretentious, Benedicto Pimentel.
Disclaiming his bourgeoisie upbringing in order to authenticate his literary project and
narrative voice, Benedicto immerses himself into Dominican poverty where he is

84 Pedro Antonio Valdez was born in the Dominican barrio of La Vega, Riito, in 1968. Incorporating his
local upbringing into the perspectives that he offers in his work, Valdez focuses on Dominican values,
aesthetics, and the tension between the transnational and the provincial.
haphazardly enlisted to join a drug-induced search for the Holy Grail alongside the barrio’s marginalized mystics, Geofredo, Santiago, and Morgana (*la secta de la Última Virtud*). From the church to the cabaret (*vellonería*), bachatas saturate the literary landscape, serving as a ritual of memory, much like the “música mulata” that Quintero Rivera describes. As a ritual of conserving or sparking memory, the bachatas presented throughout the novel emerge as a collective register of emotions that maintain a communicative value. As an adopted voice for the men who are unable to articulate emotion without expressing it through aggression and rage, the novel’s bachata lyrics and references serve as the captions or subtitles for random acts of masculine violence.

As Deborah Pacini Hernandez points out in her pivotal text, *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*,

the term *bachata*, which earlier had suggested rural backwardness and low social status, became loaded with a more complicated set of socially unacceptable features that included illicit sex, violence, heavy alcohol use, and disreputable social contexts such as seedy bars and brothels” (13).

As a hybridized genre growing out of the Dominican Republic’s transculturated musical traditions, the bachata developed in response to a socio-political crisis that was redefining Dominican identity and popular culture. The roots of bachata can be traced back to the rise of impoverished shantytowns following a shift in political power and consequential unrest during the 1960s. After Trujillo’s death and thirty-one-year regime, “campesinos” or peasants started flooding city centers such as Santo Domingo in search of work and prosperity (Pacini Hernandez 73). During that time, marginalized migrants began appropriating the “Pan-Latin American tradition of guitar music,” eventually forming a
subcategory of romantic guitar music that was heavily influenced by the Cuban bolero and the Dominican merengue (Pacini Hernandez 5).

In the compelling text, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*, George Lipsitz tracks merengue’s evolution, paying particularly close attention to the political undertones that it acquired and that nationalist rhetoric that it yielded over the course of its history in the Dominican Republic. Locating its origins in the rural music traditions of the 1840s, Lipsitz ascribes merengue’s association with Dominican nationalism to the American occupation lasting from 1916 to 1924 (135). As a “distinctive marker” of national identity, merengue assisted in mobilizing Dominicans against the U.S. occupants and eventually served as a fundamental mechanism in the nationalist machine driving Trujillo’s dictatorship from 1930 to 1961 (Lipsitz 135). It is important to note here that merengue’s alliance with nationalism was due in large part to its adoption by the bourgeoisie. In spite of its African origins and rural beginnings, the Dominican bourgeoisie and Trujillo manipulated merengue into an explicit form of propaganda that erased the nation’s African past and embraced its indigenous one in order to fully dismember the Republic from its black, Haitian neighbors. According to Lipsitz,

Trujillo put the power of the state behind merengue, because he viewed it as an emblematic icon of the nation’s white, Spanish-speaking, and Catholic traditions, a source of national unity that provided a sharp contrast to the Dominican Republic’s neighbors in Haiti, who were seen in this view as black, French-speaking, and practitioners of vodou (136).

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85 Additional bachata influences include Cuban son, guaracha, and guajira, Mexican rancheras and corridos, Puerto Rican plenas and jíbaros, and Colombian-Ecuadorian vals campesino and pasillo (Pacini Hernandez 5).

86 The bourgeoisie and Trujillo appropriated the merengue ciabeno, which comes out of the nation’s most notably European region. In spite of its regional characteristics, the merengue ciabeno still retains its integral African features (Lipsitz 137).
Merengue’s ironic transformation illuminated the profound contradictions that characterized Trujillo’s regime and Dominican identity, for Trujillo massacred tens of thousands of Haitians and “prohibited the direct acknowledgement of folk traditions with Haitian or African origins” (Lipsitz 137). Although merengue’s troublesome history did not curb enthusiasm for the genre, it did provoke a shift in national culture that was articulated by the rise of the bachata, also known as “música de amargue.” While the merengue matured into a music typically associated with the upper class, lighter skinned citizens of the Dominican Republic, the bachata—in response to the merengue and its problematic history—grew into a genre that defined the impoverished, darker skinned inhabitants of the nation’s subaltern shantytowns. Despite their opposing associations with race and class,

Merengue and bachata remain decidedly male-oriented musics celebrating the macho tigre ideais of Dominican society, but the emergence in New York of female merengue and bachata artists signals at least the potential for change in the music’s sex and gender coding. (Lipsitz 150)

Given the highly politicized and patriarchal histories of both the merengue and the bachata, it is not surprising that Pedro Antonio Valdez employs music as an organizing metaphor in his novel. Upon opening his novel, Valdez immediately engages the reader through the advisory epigraph of the novel’s first section, “Vellonera Unus”: “este deplorable autor recomienda leer teniendo de fondo musical un casete de bachatas, e implora comprensión y paciencia, si no le es mucho pedir” (Valdez 11). The author’s recommendation to read this novel with bachata music playing in the background establishes music’s fundamental role in the text from its earliest point of departure. As Kathleen Costello suggests in her article, “The Same Old Song?: Gender, Subjectivity, and Dominican Popular Music in Bachata del ángel caído,” the author appropriates the
role of a “pleading bachatero” that is exercising both masculinity and sentimentality, simultaneously (4). Embedded with elements of the bachata, the novel’s structure supports five fragmented sections, each of which opens with an epigraph comprised of bachata lyrics belonging to the Dominican Republic’s most popular bachateros: Teodoro Reyes, Anthony Santos, Luis Segura, Luis Vargas, and Eladio Romero Santos. Each lyrical epigraph defines the tone of the section that it introduces and establishes a melodramatic register for the male characters that are showcased throughout the meta/text(s). Consider for example, the Teodoro Reyes’ lyrics that open the first section of Valdez’ novel, which also doubles as the thirty-fourth chapter of the embedded “inedited” novel, La rosa de la herrumbré, penned by the novel’s self-proclaimed intellectual, Benedicto Pimentel:

No me conozco, yo no sé quién soy;
con esta angustia no podré vivir.
Con la agonía que hay en mi interior
Estoy tan loco que no sé de mí. (13)

By opening the first section of his novel with a musical articulation of one’s existential crisis and the search for self, Valdez introduces a discourse of desperation that will define identity formation throughout the text. It is important to recognize that this epigraph introduces Benedicto’s novel as well. As Benedicto’s intertextual narrative begins to unfold, the reader learns that its author is on a quest to anchor his literary vocation in the impoverished Dominican town of La Vega, also known as Riito.87 Slumming in an authentic Dominican barrio in order to construct his own identity in contrast to that of the Other, Benedicto dismembers himself from his middle class family, literary mentor, and comfortable life in the capital. Benedicto becomes a tourist in his

87 In the words of Riito native, el Enterrador, “El Riito es un entierro donde cada cual es el curioso, cada cual es el doliente y cada cual es el difunto” (181).
native country, mesmerized by the tragic poverty, degenerated language, and crude lifestyle of the barrio’s “exotic” inhabitants. In fact, Benedicto, blind to the social and historical implications of the barrio’s blatant misery, treats Riito as a vacation destination that enables his existential crisis and facilitates his “transcendental” novel: “Una novela única, transcendental, que recogiera la esencia de la gente de abajo” (89). Immediately following a detailed description of Riito’s deplorable conditions in a letter to his mentor, Dr. Prudencio de la Hoz, Benedicto proudly proclaims,

¡Todo es estupendo! ¡Exactamente la pobreza que necesito! Quienes sostienen que el paraíso no existe en la Tierra, Doctor, pueden confirmar su teoría poniendo de ejemplo este barrio. Me paso los días tomando apuntes del barrio y de esta gente, para mi tan exótica, tal como usted aconseja en su folleto Norma para escribir novellas. (22)

Benedicto could not be further removed from the reality of Riito. In this early stage of Benedicto’s narrative and existential exercise, there is a very explicit disconnect between the writer and his subject, a disconnect that stems from his literary ambitions and paternalistic notions of the Other. The cultural disconnect embedded in Benedicto’s narrative mission is comparable to that of his literary predecessor, the chronicling author/narrator of Edgardo Rodríguez Julía’s groundbreaking text, El entierro de Cortijo (1983).

In his autobiographical chronicle, Rodríguez Julía guides the reader through his own social consciousness and the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico recounting the details of Rafael Cortijo’s funeral procession. In an introduction to the chronicle, Juan Flores describes Cortijo (1928-1982) as an “unparalleled” Afro-Puerto Rican percussionist who transformed Puerto Rican society with his music and “wrought a veritable revolution in Puerto Rican musical culture” (Flores 1). Deconstructing class lines and redefining
popular music, language, and culture, Cortijo y Su Combo “brought the music of the poor out of isolation” (5) in the mid-1950s and “‘modernized’ the traditional vernacular forms of bomba and plena [while] at the same time forcefully reestablish[ing] their African and working class roots” (2). Cortijo’s musical achievements define a pivotal part of Puerto Rican history and continue to cut across the socially constructed boundaries of race and class that dominate the island. A cause for national mourning, Cortijo’s death symbolized much more than the fall of a musical monument; it marked the end of an era: “the era of Cortijo’s Combo and of Muñoz Marín’s Operation Bootstrap, a full thirty years after its heyday” (Flores 7). The national nostalgia associated with Cortijo and his music demonstrates the colossal role that music/ians play in the Puerto Rican imaginary and the collective consciousness of la gran familia puertorriqueña.

Much like Benedicto, the chronicler of El entierro is a light-skinned, middle-class writer exploring the politics of memory and the social divides that are conquered and exacerbated in the name of music. Surrounded by San Juan’s darker, lower-class inhabitants—“el mundo proletario”—the chronicler grapples with the identity of the Other and demonstrates how otherness is reassigned based on shifting perspectives. It is precisely in his desire to approach or approximate the Other (the subaltern social body of the mob) that the chronicler inadvertently exposes his own otherness and discovers himself in social limbo as a native foreigner, a privileged Other. Although the chronicler exemplifies a noble self-awareness throughout his narrative, there is an unsettling sentiment of slumming that obscures his intentions and emphasizes his distance from the masses as well as his uncomfortable unfamiliarity with the customs that he is observing. The chronicler’s otherness is rooted in the fact that he is an observer and not a
participant. Like Benedicto, the chronicler becomes a foreigner in his own land, unfamiliar with the language and the people speaking it, including Cortijo’s “lifelong compadre” and former band mate, Ismael Rivera (Maleo):

Estoy frente por frente a Maleo, lo estoy mirando en esta cercanía que casi me vuelve invisible, pero no entiendo nada lo que dice; es como una jerigonza privada a una sola vez entre los dos capitanes del mandinga soneo mayor, quizás alguna consigna en cangá del Siglo XVIII, o un lenguaje íntimo y personal cuya clave sólo ellos conocían. (Rodríguez Julía 104)

In addition to emphasizing the chronicler’s linguistic isolation, this excerpt articulates a connection between Maleo and Cortijo’s cadaver that runs much deeper than the unintelligible words of grief and sobs of mourning documented by the chronicler. The music that they created together activates a bloodline or genealogy that immortalizes their brotherly bond and performative kinship.

In *Bachata del ángel caído*, Valdez echoes the linguistic isolation depicted in this scene by showcasing the elitist pedantry of the dominant western episteme in opposition to the accessibility of an alternative Caribbean epistemology, which celebrates the vernaculars popularized by music and street culture. In one of the many letters that Benedicto writes to Dr. Prudencio de la Hoz, he describes his efforts to learn the local dialect and popular slang of Riito:

Ese diccionario de dominicanismos de Pedro Henríquez Ureña me ha sido de importante ayuda para comprender la jerga de esta gente, Doctor. Pero el lenguaje de la calle crece más libre y veloz que los registros académicos, por lo que existen cientos de palabras recientes no incluidas en esa interesante obra. (Valdez 62)

Although Benedicto is isolated and marginalized by his inability to understand Riito’s local dialect, he remains fascinated by the improvisational and dynamic nature of the

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88 The intertextual reference to Pedro Henríquez Ureña’s exhaustive work on *dominicanismos* (*El español en Santo Domingo*, 1940) establishes a genealogy of lettered Dominicans.
barrio’s vernacular. In an effort to develop his Dominican identity and narrative voice, Benedicto decides to appropriate the colloquialisms of his environment much like the literary traditions of regionalismo and costumbrismo that dominated the Latin American canon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, celebrating the “richness” of a language in progress:

No puedo escribir sobre el barrio con otro lenguaje que no sea del barrio. Y pienso que si yo pudiera configurar un lenguaje que recogiera toda la riqueza del habla popular, y lograra universalizar ese lenguaje, sería algo maravilloso. (62)

By the end of his letter to the doctor, Benedicto has nearly adopted the popular dialect as his own: what starts out as “the slang of these people” (“la jerga de esta gente”) becomes “our dialect” (“nuestra habla popular”), demonstrating a gradual shift in identity and consciousness that marks the beginning of his integration into the community of Riito.

The subtlety of Benedicto’s shift (adoption of the vernacular) is particularly tense given the fact that he refers to the cultured language of the Real Academia as “nuestra lengua” in the sentence preceding it:

…he ido encontrando un sin número de palabras obscenas que no son aceptadas por la lengua culta, ya que la Real Academia consider que en nuestra lengua la indecencia lingüística no existe. Pero hay dos términos de nuestra habla popular que han llamado mucho mi atención… (63)

In spite of this tension, however, Benedicto’s plural usage of the possessive pronoun “nuestra” is a nod toward the possibility of acquiring a shared sensibility or split subjectivity that embodies an aspect of the nation’s popular identity.

In the case of both writing narrators—Benedicto and the chronicler—there is an element of education assigned to their fascination with the culture of orality. The juxtaposition that is established by the oral transmission of popular knowledge through
music and the highbrow reception of this knowledge through the written word offers an intertextual commentary on the Caribbean cannon and the role of music in and as a text. This narrative tension speaks back to the de-privileging of literature that Dalleo cites in his discussion of subaltern representations in Caribbean letters. As a mouthpiece for the subaltern communities that are depicted in the works of Valdez and Juliá, music emerges as a pivotal point of contact that marks the threshold of social limbo. Interestingly, both authors use music as bait for luring their “intellectual” characters into the dark shadows of society’s so-called subculture or underworld. By temporarily dismembering themselves from high society in an effort to experience the “desclasamiento” they’ve witnessed from a distance, Benedicto and the chronicler commit to a process of identity re/formation that forces them to reconsider their roles in and relationships to the social body of the nation.

During his time spent in Riito, Benedicto encounters a full cast of characters that are emblematic of the wounded machismo propagated by the cathartic lyrics of bachata—the most notable of those men being, of course, the boisterous Machote. Performing machismo just as his name suggests, el Machote was forced to support his mother and fulfill the male gender roles prescribed by patriarchy since early childhood after his father died in a bar fight at the moment of his birth:

el Machote viose forzado desde pequeño a mantener a su mamá…El niño tuvo que jugar, sin otra opción posible, a ser el padre: el que traía el sustento, el que defendía la casa, el que veía como quien no ve nada a los otros niños jugar a ser niños. (61)

As an only child, Machote is ultimately left orphaned and dismembered from kinship when his mother dies. This loss, coupled with paternal absence, forces Machote into a state of solitude that molds him into the reincarnation of his father: “verse solo en el
mundo, materialmente solo, y vuelto un muchacho que no tardó en reencarnar el recuerdo de su padre en los territorios de la albañilería, de la virilidad infinita, de los cabaretes” (61). Constantly reminded by his mother that he was his father’s son—“Nunca olvides que eres hijo de tu padre” (61)—Machote constructs his gender identity around the only facets of virility that his father’s legacy has to offer: manual labor and the components of cabaret culture—illicit sex, excessive drinking, and physical violence. Embedded in both manual labor and cabaret culture are the elements of conquest and domination that drive patriarchal power. An adept bricklayer like his father, Machote’s work in the field of construction not only emphasizes his physical strength and innate masculinity, it also demonstrates his ability to conquer and dominate a designated body of land, imposing order and exercising force as if the land were the domesticated wife in his home.

This discourse of domination is further replicated in Luis Canario’s bar, where el Machote releases his frustration through the sexual conquest of La China, drowns his sorrows in alcohol, and contacts his emotional memory through the omniscient presence of bachatas. While priding himself on his countless conquests and celebrated sexual performances, Machote’s machismo remains in constant contention with that of his enemy, El Gua. Sharing sexual partners that include el Machote’s wife, Caridad, and the preferred prostitute, La China, el Machote and el Gua maintain their interpersonal rivalry while inadvertently establishing a kinship of machismo through the patriarchal practice of trafficking women. As Rubin explains, the traffic in or exchange of women offers a critical point of departure for understanding the oppression of women within social systems while illuminating the ways in which women, as a replacement for gifts or

89 El Gua and la China are supposedly engaged, but their relationship never materializes over the course of the novel. La China’s alleged status as el Gua’s fiancé does not countermand her role as the novel’s famed prostitute.
merchandise, contribute to the social relations and kinship systems forged between men (175). According to Rubin, “Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access…” (177). Rubin’s concept of the traffic in women is particularly useful here because it echoes the sex/gender system that is proliferated by bachatas. With respect to female oppression and male domination, Pacini Hernandez explains:

The economic basis of male-female relationships in the shantytown context was evident in bachateros’ frequent references to being the dueño (owner) of a woman, suggesting that women were considered an economic resource much like any other possession; “owning” a woman bestowed upon a man all sorts of benefits of which her sexuality was only one. In some cases, the references to ownership implied a pimp-prostitute relationship…If a man lost a woman, it meant an economic as well as an emotional loss and, moreover, dealt a serious blow to his social status and self-esteem. (171)

By exchanging women and thus sharing sexual access to them, el Machote and el Gua become entangled in a corrupt revisioning of kinship that resonates with the “triangular desire” that René Girard devises in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Bearing resemblance to Girard’s paradigm, Valdez’ triangle thrives on patriarchal transgressions and offers a commentary on the homosocial bonds that are established in the competitive pursuit of a woman. The triangle that forms between el Machote, Caridad, and el Gua—the mediator—incites a patriarchal quest for phallic power that is ultimately resolved via elimination of the desired object. Following Girard’s explanation, “The mediator here is a rival, brought into existence as a rival by vanity, and that same vanity demands his defeat” (7). Before el Machote can defeat his mediating rival, he must first defeat Caridad, who has humiliated his manhood and betrayed his trust by planning to leave the Dominican Republic with her lover, el Gua. In order to recuperate the phallic power that was transferred to el Gua, Machote penetrates Caridad nearly fifty times with a knife, killing her and assuming the phallic power that she stole from him. The phallic knife that
Machote uses to murder his wife proves to have a double edge—although Caridad is the actual victim of male aggression and violence, it is Machote who feels victimized by her sexual indiscretion and infidelity. Although Caridad is punished for her bad behavior, el Machote is never punished for his. The patriarchal hypocrisy characterizing this scenario—men are allowed to cheat on their wives, but women are punished, shamed, scorned, and murdered for cheating on their husbands—is buttressed if not validated by the changing culture of bachatas:

> Whereas in early bachatas a man might lament that a woman had left him, in bachatas of the late 1970s and 1980s, he was more likely to express anger, disillusion, and often an implacable hostility not only toward the individual woman but toward all women as a group. (Pacini Hernandez 159)

Relying on the encoded messages of the bachata soundtracks to inform his emotions and behavior, el Machote is essentially *kinning* with his father by embodying the virility that his patriarch and the genre represent. El Machote even goes so far as to substitute his inner voice with the voices of varying *bacheteros* in order to model his actions and justify his reckless behavior. Consider, for example, el Machote’s previous effort to win back Caridad’s affection with a recipe for romance prescribed by the lyrics of a popular bachata: “Recordó la bachata que dice que el amor se alimenta de vino y rosas” (95). With intentions of seducing Caridad after a local prostitute (*cuero*) plants the seeds of suspicion in his imagination, el Machote returns home from the bar with a rose between his teeth and a bottle of wine in his hand. Exemplifying a complete lack of consideration for the woman he is trying to romance, Machote wakes his sleeping wife and forces himself upon her after she refuses to partake in drinking and sexual intercourse.
Machote’s romantic failures are further documented in the novel’s fourth section, “Vellonera Quattuor.” Opening “Vellonera Quattuor” and contextualizing the senseless acts of violence that Machote commits in the pages that follow are the lyrics of the famous Dominican bachatero, Luis Vargas:

De ti me separo porque ya no puedo soportar la angustia, saber que te quiero.
Tu amor es como una de esas raras que nublan la mente y agitan el alma (123)

While foreshadowing the anguish of separation and loss that Machote will experience, these lyrics allude to the intense agitation and mind-blurring jealousy that inspire Machote to rape the teasing gay male prostitute, Mecedora, and brutally murder his unfaithful wife, Caridad. After Machote’s manhood is threatened and humiliated by Mecedora—“¡Prueba que eres un macho!” (126)—Machote musters up all of the male aggression that he has to dominate his queer seductor:

El Machote vaciló entre reírse o patearlo. En esa dicotomía estaba cuando en una transición repentina—atraído por la extraña seducción o desabordado de sadismo, o entregado a la rabia ciega que suele producir el hastío—, coloco al Mecedora en cuatro patas, le bajó el pantalón a la brava y, exagerando la inconsciencia de la borrachera, lo poseyó brutalmente bajo el framboyán. (126)

Instead of merely laughing at this seductive challenge, el Machote submits to his “blind rage” and sadistic tendencies, leaving Mecedora, raped and battered, in a puddle of his own blood under the moonlight. Like the bachatero who has a clouded mind and a shaken soul, el Machote is blinded by his own delirium and released from the responsibility of his actions. Illuminating the irony of his very nickname, Mecedora desconstructs the rigid notions of Machote’s masculinity while Caridad transforms her husband into a cuckhold. As the instigators of Machote’s violence, are Mecedora and Caridad complicit to it? Once again, el Machote views himself as an innocent victim
here, protecting his manhood and paying homage to his machismo. It is precisely this victimization complex that displaces accountability from him, the male aggressor, and reassigns it to the woman that inflicted pain in the first place.

The Vargas’ lyrics included above are followed by another set of melodramatic lyrics that are extracted from the Cuban bolero, “Yo estoy desenganado” by the renowned Cuban **bolerista**, Orlando Contreras:

Desenganado de bares y cantinas,  
de tanta hipocresía, de tanta falsedad,  
de los amigos que dicen ser amigos,  
de las mujeres que mienten al besar,  
lo que es ser pobre, lo que es tener moneda,  
esa experiencia allí se adquiere mucho más.

Alzo mi copa en triunfo a mi experiencia,  
que no se aprende en escuela ni en hogar,  
eso se aprende en la calle, en la cantina,  
copa tras copa bajo el fondo musical,  
de la victrola que te dice tantas cosas,  
y de los labios que te mienten al besar. (125)

Expressing disillusion and defeat, these lyrics provide a subtext for the murderous events that follow. In the first verse, the **bolerista** reveals a list of personal grievances rooted in the falsehoods and hypocrisy of doomed interpersonal relationships. From cheating women to lying friends, the singer contemplates disappointment in the competing contexts of poverty and wealth. In the second verse, however, the tone shifts from defeated to victorious, celebrating the triumphs of the painful experiences and the lessons that were learned along the way. Highlighting the educational or experiential value of the streets, the bars, the music, and the mistakes that were made in the past, the **bolerista** essentially celebrates the education acquired from specifically male dominated spaces, while indirectly shunning the opportunity to learn life lessons within the predominantly
female (domesticated) spaces of a school or home. The women that Contreras alludes to in this song are associated with betrayal—deceiving a man by lying to him and cheating on him behind his back. If the bolerista can’t trust a woman, how can he possibly trust the lessons learned in any of the spaces that they occupy? Deception and female subjectivity become conflated in these lyrics, ultimately exposing a powerful but problematic gender dynamic that Aparicio outlines in the following excerpt:

Two contradictory values in gender politics dovetail here. While the affective and emotional language of the bolero allows men to communicate and express themselves in the affective domain, becoming a liberatory value in the context of social boundaries, the construction of the male as woman’s victim dangerously positions women as the object of male aggression, revenge, or violence, converging, in fact, with the more overtly misogynist discourse of salsa and other forms of popular music. (137)

With respect to el Machote and his growing distrust of women, the lyrics of this song are positioned in a way that justifies his emotional outbursts and violent fits of rage. Music, in this case, fulfills a cognitive function that inspires el Machote’s actions and shapes his memory: “El Machote las oyó apagarse cuando saltaba el canal, aunque de alguna manera ya estaban como grabadas con un puzón en su memoria” (125).

Music’s ability to manipulate one’s memory surfaces as a trope in Mayra Montero’s novel, *Son de Almendra*, as well. Unlike the lyrical ballads of the bolero and the bachata, the genre that contextualizes Montero’s historical fiction and Joaquín’s memory is an elegant, instrumental danzón. As Robin Moore expounds in his book, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and the Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*, the danzón is a refined ballroom dance genre that originated in Cuba during the
second half of the nineteenth century (23). Exhibiting a fusion of heavy European retentions, Afrocuban traditions, and Haitian practices that migrated to Cuba with black and mulatto refugees during the Haitian Revolution, the danzón emerged as a national music during Cuba’s Wars of Independence (Moore 23). As Alejo Carpentier claims, the danzón, which descended from bailes de cuadro or square dances, were “virtually identical” to its musical predecessors, danza and contradanza (Moore 23). Because of its intimate dance style, the danzón was often conflated with promiscuity and associated with a fear of “improper racial mixing” that shook the conservative core of Cuba’s middle-class (24). In 1898, following Cuba’s independence from Spain and the U.S. military occupation of the island, the danzón was reintroduced into mainstream middle-class society as an expression of nationalism that defied the musical influences arriving from the United States (Moore 25). During this time, the genre’s reputation as lewd and lascivious disappeared, as did its African origins, which were erased in an effort to subdue the Afrocuban elements of Cuban popular culture.

Composed by the Cuban musician, Abelardo Valdés in 1938, the danzón and title song “Almendra” is an instrumental composition that includes one singular refrain, “Son de almendra, guayaba no.” Highly popularized during the latter half of the 1950s, “Almendra” epitomizes an era in the Cuban imaginary and anchors Montero’s literary landscape in a larger historical context. Throughout the novel, this particular danzón maintains a seemingly omniscient presence; even if its melody is not glaring from the radio or a dance hall, its rhythm is constantly looming in the back of Joaquín’s mind, pulling him in and out of his own memories and bouts of nostalgia. The song symbolizes

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90 Although the danzón was popularized and appropriated by “members of the middle-class black social clubs and transformed into a ‘respectable’ ballroom dance” by the 1870s, the genre may have developed among the black urban poor as early as the 1850s (Moore 23).
an emotional landmark for Joaquín as well as an historical landmark for Montero, who is nostalgically writing her way back to the Cuban childhood she was forced to abandon:

Quizá ‘Almendra’ sea el símbolo que ha escogido Mayra Montero para representar toda una época. Se identifica con Lansky pero también con La Habana del año ‘57. La ciudad no sólo está descrita y habitada sino que también puede ser olida, gustada, y escuchada, y el ritmo repetidamente escuchado es el danzón ‘Almendra.’ (Romeu 152)

Operating as a nostalgic anecdote within the text, “Almendra” constantly reminds Joaquín of significant first experiences—his first love, his first (rejected) kiss, his first heartbreak, and his first date with Yolanda—all of which point back to the woman of his dreams and the mother of his closest childhood friend, Aurora.

By activating the memory of these primal experiences through “Almendra,” Montero alleviates the tension that arises between the son in her title and the danzón that permeates her text. In contrast to the danzón, the son is recognized as a genre that marks a series of “significant firsts” in Cuban history. According to Moore,

[Son] was the first black street genre to gain national acceptance and to be performed commercially without excessive stylistic alteration or transformation. Together with música guajira (the music of Hispanic campesinos), it was among the first working-class genres to be disseminated on recordings and in radio broadcasts. It was the first to prominently feature musical and vocal improvisation and to incorporate an Afrocuban drum (the bongó) performed with the bare hands. (89)

Developing as a marginal genre in the poor, black and mulatto areas of Havana during the first decade of the twentieth century, son was a genre most closely associated with the Afrocuban experience. Unlike the danzón, the son was popularized and widely disseminated as an instrumental, vocal, and dance form whose lyrics often embodied political issues, social currents, and sexual innuendos (Moore 89, 90). I read the roots of son in conjunction with Montero’s title in order to better understand the discrepancy in
terminology that she employs. In doing so, the written text of Montero’s novel emerges as a son that offers a lyrical narrative to accompany the emotionally charged but lyric-less danzón.

While music in the previously discussed texts offers a subtext or musical subtitle for the characters’ actions, emotions, and memories, the presence of danzón in Montero’s novel provides a subtle soundtrack that triggers Joaquín’s memory and activates an archive of nostalgia. This nostalgic archive originates in the impactful image of Aurora dancing to the popular danzón “Almendra” with the mafia kingpin, Meyer Lansky. As if describing a primal scene, Joaquín recalls the details of the dancing couple accompanied by the hypnotic rhythm of the danzón:

Ahora bailaban. Sentí fasincación por la pareja tan intensa que formaban, la sorda lujuria que les bajaba por la cara: él la agarraba suavemente, sin forzar el roce, y ella, que era un poco más alta, bajaba los párpados para sentir el ritmo. Tan tan tan taratantan…Tan tan tan taratantan…<<Son de almendra, guayaba no…Son de almendra, mi china>>. (127)

Overwhelmed by their rhythmic fluidity and undeniable chemistry, the adolescent Joaquín encounters jealousy and rage as he processes the image before him: “Yo sabía lo que era abrazar a una mujer, apretarse a su cuerpo, hundirse en ella; y todo eso, muchísimo más, lo estaba haciendo aquel hombre con Aurora, era imposible que no me parara a imaginar la escena” (126). This moment is particularly jolting for Joaquín because it marks a memorial milestone around which all of his other memories are constructed and traced back to Aurora.

Like an open wound that won’t heal, the repetitive beats of “Almendra” nag at Joaquín’s psyche and constantly recall the primal scene of his adolescent memory. Like the song that plagues him, Aurora personifies a permanent pang in Joaquín’s memory, a
phantom limb-like sensation that is exacerbated by music: “Aurora era un pinchazo en la memoria (esa parte de la memoria que uno guarda en el bajo vientre)” (79). Even in his present contexts, such as his first date with Yolanda, Joaquín can’t help but pay meticulous attention to the background music: “Pedí un ron, intenté concentrarme en la música, una orquesta de mujeres que tocaba un danzón. Casualidad que ese danzón fuera el dichoso Almendra” (54). Immediately following this observation, Joaquín reverts to a nostalgic recollection of Aurora and considers the ways that Yolanda reminds him of her:

Yolanda también se daba un aire a Aurora…No en el físico, por supuesto, el parecido se daba en otro plano, a un nivel quizá un poco alegórico que se originaba dentro de mi cráneo, y que dependía totalmente de eso: de mi forma de percibirlas y, en cierto modo, acecharlas. (Montero 54)

Joaquín’s attraction to and perception of Yolanda is manipulated by his desire to modify the past through the present, which echoes Andreea Deciu Ritviolli’s assertion that “nostalgia represents a way of amending personal history in an attempt to ‘freeze’ certain moments in time to relive them again” (36).

Joaquín’s ability to accommodate the past within the present displays aspects of Proustian nostalgia or involuntary memory, in that “it does not quite ‘transport’ one to the past, as much as it brings the past into the present by affording the former more acuity” (Ritivoli 34). Although Proust’s conception of nostalgia was generated by the act sipping tea and eating madeleines, which he narrates in the foundational text, In Search of Lost Time (Remembrance of Things Past), the unconscious act of hearing a specific song sparks a similar reaction in Joaquín; for memory and music become entangled as one. By “presencing” the past rather than fully resurrecting it, Joaquín achieves an atemporality that restores the essence of a specific past (Ritivoli 34). In that atemporal moment, the “Nostalgia projects a mythic world, which is not only perfect, but also primordial, a
world from which everything else unfolds” (Ritivoli 35). When analyzed in conjunction with nostalgia, Joaquín’s primal “Almendra” scene locates a pivotal point of origins that informs his memorial trajectory and situates his nostalgic accommodations of the past within the present.

In contrast to the bachatas that trigger el Machote’s memory, the popular Cuban danzón in Montero’s novel activates memory through rhythm rather than lyrics. Despite the distinction that is drawn between the melodramatic language of the bachata and the primordial rhythms of the danzón, the genres’ shared memorial function creates a compelling commentary on masculinity and musicality. Like Valdez’ Benedicto and Juliá’s chronicler, Joaquín is another lettered intellectual that is overtaken by music and expressions of the popular. Following the literary footsteps of the two writing protagonists before him, Joaquín succumbs to a level of slumming through the journalistic investigation of Havana’s mafia subculture and his love affair with the mulata manca, Yolanda. Recovering masculinity in his conquest of Yolanda, Joaquín attempts to redress the manhood that was previously wounded by his unrequited love for Aurora. The heartbreak and humiliation characterizing his past love are bundled into an unspeakable trauma that is best characterized by the lyric-less orchestral stylings of the elegant and intoxicating danzón. On the contrary, el Machote’s vulnerable masculinity and romantic traumas are rooted in, voiced, and subsequently reenacted through his misogynistic interpretation of bachata lyrics.

El Machote is not the only male character affected by the misogynistic undertones of the popular bachata songs. In fact, just as the novel’s title phrase suggests, there is a conflation of the sacred and the profane that is exposed in the interpersonal rivalry
between padre Ruperto and the nameless sacristan. With shared intentions of conquering the sanctimonious church hand, Liberata, padre Ruperto and the sacristan abandon their holy duties to Catholicism and revert to their machismo instincts. Cruelly reduced to the superficial commentary regarding her “ugly” face and her sensual body, Liberata doesn’t seem to stand a chance in the patriarchal society that is exploiting her:

La bondad en el rostro de la mujer hacía que la repugnancia diera paso a un raro sentimiento de piedad. No hay cosa peor que la santurronería en las mujeres feas; la putería les sienta mejor, porque ofrece la remota posibilidad de que se les pegue algún romance. (84)

Unlike padre Ruperto, the sacristán claims to be desperately in love with Liberata:

“Liberata era fea, cuarentona, medio estúpida, y virgen. Pero el sacristán la amaba con la tensión de todos los corazones” (31). Despite her homely features and piousness, the sacristán attempts to charm Liberata with love letters and date invitations, which she consistently rejects until the sacristan’s brother finally convinces her to accept his innocent courtship. When the sacristan asks Ruperto for his blessing, he refuses and instead, advises the sacristan to abort his pursuit of Liberata: “Tienes que olvidarte de Liberata, porque está destinada a otro propósito: va a vestir los santos hábitos” (110). The priest takes ownership of Liberata as if she were his wife and thus has no intentions of sharing her with anybody else. At one point, Liberata is compared to a well-trained dog that punctually prepares the priest’s meals, which satisfy his hunger as well as his sexual appetite: “Liberata, como un perro condicionado y feo de Pavlov, llegó a preparar la cena con puntualidad escrupulosa” (131). While feigning celibacy, padre Ruperto eroticizes the preparation and consumption of food, two activities that are dependent on the presence of Liberata. The eroticization of food is made explicitly apparent in the priest’s fetish for guineos, the unripened green bananas that he covets and craves on a
regular basis. Voraciously consuming the *guineos*, padre Ruperto establishes a peculiar if not transgressive relationship with the fruit, sensually unpeeling its skin and slowly savoring its meat: “Pelaba cada fruta con el mismo encanto que se desnuda a una mujer. Luego la digería a mordiscos velozes. Entre las breves treguas del pelar, el padre desarrollaba una apología del guineo” (80). The phallic implications of this revision of the forbidden fruit speak volumes to the priest’s repressed sexuality and insatiable sexual appetite. The queer nuances of his sexual appetite are, however, countermanded by his eventual conquest of Liberata.

As the personification of patriarchial ideals, padre Ruperto succumbs to the gender roles and misogyny prescribed by bachatas in his attempt to seduce Liberata and defeat the sacristan. While watching Liberata clean up after dinner one evening, padre Ruperto shamelessly accuses her of tempting him with her walk and asks her if she were trying to seduce him, while in fact he is actually seducing her: “¿Por qué caminas de esa manera frente a mí? ¿Ya olvidaste lo que te dije sobre las tentaciones? Tú eres tremenda, muchachita…¿Qué ganas intentando seducirme?” (133). By shifting the accountability of seduction from himself to Liberata, padre Ruperto submits to the patriarchal trend of female shaming and scapegoating that is popularized by bachata. Unbeknownst to the priest and Liberata, the sacristan observes the entirety of their sexual encounter and, out of jealousy and rage, publically denounces them both in a sermon that echoes the performativity and disillusion of a bachata confession. Following the profound scene of subjection that publicly scandalizes her illicit affair with the priest, Liberata is left to battle the brutal shaming, humiliation, and hypocritical judgment of Riito, while padre Ruperto is painlessly and quietly reassigned to a new church in another part of the
country. Unlike the dueling men that shamed her, Liberata’s humiliation is exploited as a spectacle, staining her female subjectivity and tarnishing her reputation forever: “La gente veía pasar a Liberata con reticencia, con fruición soterrada y hasta como con gratitud por permitirles presenciar el espectáculo de su propia caída” (149).

In the spirit of misogyny, women are consistently shamed and scorned throughout the novel, objectified by their sexuality and demonized by the temptation that they present:

La mujer es mala por naturaleza, mientras que el hombre sólo es malo por accidente. Originalmente el hombre fue creado a imagen y semejanza de Dios, así que es bueno por extensión, y sólo por la tentación de la mujer pudo caer en el pecado…Protégete, pues, de la mujer.91 (110)

Liberata’s transformation into a social pariah is a form of dismemberment, which parallels that of the renowned prostitute, la China. La China’s life was essentially stolen from her when a “vicecónsul” promised to facilitate her dreams by sending her to Spain where she would earn higher wages working as a domestic in the house of a diplomat. Instead, the young, well-educated Chinese girl was sold into sex trafficking and sequestered in a seedy cabaret (78). After a year in Spain, La China was ultimately deported back to the Dominican Republic where she was rejected by her family and forced to continue her life as a prostitute (79). Repeatedly discarded by and dismembered from her family, the society, and the nation, la China represents the disposability of women and personifies the desperate female non-citizens who are denied access to their bodies, their kinship, and their voices.

91 Even the omniscient character, la Muerte (death), takes on the form of a woman, constantly cursed for robbing men of their lives. With the exception of Morgana who successfully gathers the clues for the Holy Grail, la Muerte is the only female character that can retain her agency in the novel. La Muerte never submits to male domination or conquest, even when her male foil, el Enterrador tries to deceive her.
The only male character in the novel that is deprived of a voice is the mute, Platanón. As a mute orphan, dismembered from discourse and kinship, Platanón juxtaposes the high level of orality operating throughout the text. As the local madman in search of an allegedly stolen cow, Platanón’s presence in the novel seems to approach the typically silenced existence of the poor while allegorizing the “degeneration of language” (Dalleo 210) in the microcosmic barrio of Riito. Because language is already compromised by class divisions and the adulterated narratives of popular music, Valdez seems to be offering an alternative critique on the treachery of oral discourse. With the exception of Platanón and Benedicto (who relies on the written word), the male characters in this novel get caught between the victimization and agency of oral discourse. A double edge sword, oral discourse is precisely what propels the novel’s macho characters toward violence, while simultaneously inspiring them to drown their own voices in the communal canned recordings of popular bachatas. Valdez touches on the collectivity and treachery of oral discourse in a contemplative excerpt that considers music in terms of ownership:

La vellonera circunscribe el tiempo a una sucesión de bachatas. Las canciones no son de quien las escribe, sino de quien las sabe cantar, porque una canción se hace en la voz, en el papel...Las canciones, como las mujeres, no son de nadie: o mejor dicho, no son de ellas mismas o del que en un momento dado las sabe tocar. (176)

As dismembered oral fragments, recorded bachatas lack a specific point of origin or ownership, and convert themselves into communal property. As communal property, bachatas are manipulated by an individual voice or a collective sentiment, which activate an emotional genealogy or performative kinship for those producing and consuming the music. Although Platanón does not have a voice of his own, ventriloquized or canned
voices are readily available to him due in part to the oral accessibility and vocal expressions that abound in recorded music.

**Conclusion**

Operating as a site of memory in all of the novels discussed in this chapter, music presents an additional, metatextual narrative that bestows on each text an intricate network of social and emotional discourses that offer a voice to the unspeakable feelings and unarticulated memories of each character. Demonstrating how music is embedded in history and how history is embedded in music, these novels along with the musical-textual artifact, *Plenas*, reveal the profound orality and musicality that is ingrained in the Caribbean experience. By destabilizing the institutionalized retentions of colonialism through the union of music and literature, Santos-Febres and Valdez dismember themselves from the highbrow canon in order to re-member themselves to a popular Caribbean episteme.

In *Sirena Selena*, the reader confronts music as a therapeutic consolation and last resort for what Nathaniel Mackey calls “wounded kinship” (232). As an instrument of *kinning* and rememory, the boleros in Santos-Febres’ novel reconstruct failed or broken adoptive communities while providing a genealogy of othermothering for the orphaned Selena. According to Mackey,

> the quintessential source of music is the orphan’s ordeal—an orphan being anyone denied kinship, social sustenance, anyone who suffers, to use Orlando Patterson’s phrase, ‘social death’…Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of ‘orphan’ one hears echoes of ‘orphic,’ a music that turns on abandonment, absence, loss. Think of the black spiritual “Motherless Child.” (232)

Like the boleros that Selena sings, the orphan or orphic music to which Mackey refers, provides a framework for thinking about the degeneration of language and the
deconstruction of kinship that inspire Selena’s soulful embodiment of the songs she so powerfully performs.

Although the boleros in *Sirena Selena* inspire a matrifocal genealogy of othermothering, the genre’s machista undertones and patriarchal position should not be overlooked. Following Aparicio’s assertion that the bolero constructs the feminine as absence—“an absence that stimulates the expression and articulation of male desire through the text/song and through the act of singing” (125)—it seems as though Selena, while physically performing femininity in her makeup and dress, is vocally performing masculinity through the lyrical stylings of the bolero. So often allegorized as unrequited or unconsummated love, the bolero’s feminine void surfaces as one of the genre’s many patriarchal retentions, reinforcing machismo and male constructions of femininity. In a discussion of the genre’s stance on women, Aparicio states:

> The continental, eternal, and ubiquitous body of the bolero as sociomusical practice is closely linked to patriarchy and to its male-gendered voices and lyrics. Heir to the Western tradition of courtly love, boleros continue to articulate masculine constructs of the feminine, from the ideal and impossible woman to more universal archetypes, such as woman seductress and witch, the femme fatale, the ungrateful woman who betrays the man’s love, and the ‘lost woman,’ the latter image containing multiple meanings. (128)

As a musical tradition, the bolero dictates femininity and “reveal[s] the masculinist strategies of men in silencing the woman through seduction and eroticism” (Aparicio 133). This process of silencing encourages one to “question who speaks through boleros or perhaps most important, whose voices have been heard or rather ‘filtered’ through the discourse of love” (Aparicio 133). In the case of *Sirena Selena*, it is Selena who appropriates the voice of a bolerista to assert and exercise a masculinity that has been adapted if not wholeheartedly consumed by the discourse of love. This discourse of love,
however, is destabilized by homosexual desire and transvestism, both of which speak to
the genre’s “constant reshifting of [the] limits between voice and maleness” (Quiroga
161).

Consistent with the genre’s tradition of crossing borders and genderbending, the
boleros scattered throughout Santos-Febres’ novel uncovers a syncopated layer of
commentary on the discourse of cross-dressing that facilitates Selena’s transformation
into “the ideal and impossible woman” that Aparicio mentions above. Existing in
tandem, Selena’s machismo and femininity converge on her body. The bolero
comfortably accommodates this convergence merely in “[t]he fact that men can assume
the feminized language of the affective realm without being cast as feminine themselves
attests to a most central patriarchal function of this musical form” (Aparicio 135). By
ontologizing the lyrics and aesthetics of the bolero, Selena is in fact cross-dressing in the
music, wearing the low masculine timbres of a bolerista’s voice and the tantalizing
accessories of a temptress. While the bolero, like the bachata, pathologizes the female
seductress and victimizes the typically heartbroken male protagonist, Santos-Febres
manipulates the genre’s traditional gender dynamic, creating a paradigm that is infinitely
complicated by the queer consumer and the cross-dressing performance artist. By
rewriting boleros within the frame of cross-dressing, Santos-Febres unleashes a
counterdiscourse of masculinity that subverts the genre’s heterosexual machismo and
reinscribes a heteroglossic articulation of queer desire.

In contrast to Sirena Selena, Valdez’ Bachata del ángel caído deploys boleros to
encapsulate a provincial aesthetic that reflects the experience of the Dominican popular,
while offering a voice to the often silenced and subaltern masses of the barrio. In doing
so, the bachatas create a genealogy of machismo that reinforces stereotypical gender roles and validates violent or volatile male behavior. In order to illuminate the dangerous trappings of patriarchy that are perpetuated and celebrated by bachatas, Valdez appropriates common stereotypes in order to reveal the rampant perils and blind acceptance of quotidian misogyny in Dominican popular culture. Similar to the way that the bolero is deployed as a mask of masculinity in *Sirena Selena*, the bachata is assimilated as an affective and effective device for performing machismo in *Bachata del ángel caído*.

As demonstrated by these novels and the chapter’s introductory text, *Plenas*, music in or as literature serves as a meditational tool that communicates or conveys a specific memory that might otherwise be confounded by the silence of epistemic violence. In her discussion of the roles that literature and music play in postcolonial societies, Nourbese Philip explains how both artistic forms of expression “remain in productive tension with each other as complementary ways to integrate and move a fractured society toward w/holeness” (Philip 92). Music, as an alternative Caribbean episteme, has the ability to reconnect the pieces of a Caribbean history that have been torn and tattered by the dominant, Western epistemology.
Conclusion. What Constitutes a Complete (Caribbean) Body?

After evaluating the revisionary interpretations of a holistic existence put forth by the novels discussed in this dissertation, here I trace the literary genealogy of Puerto Rico’s folkloric s/hero and infamous madam, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, most widely recognized as Isabel la Negra. In spite of the fact that there is little known about her life, Isabel la Negra has been transformed posthumously into a literary icon, fictionalized by several Puerto Rican writers including Rosario Ferré, Manuel Ramos Otero, and Mayra Santos-Febres, whose short stories and novel include “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” (1975), “La última plena que bailó Luberza” (1975), and Nuestra señora de la noche (2006), respectively. I believe that Isabel la Negra Luberza Oppenheimer serves as an appropriate subject for this coda because all three of her literary depictions flesh out the themes organizing this dissertation: patriarchal violence, broken families and kinship structures, dismemberment, and lastly, an innate musicality that immortalizes and composes her fragmented memory in Puerto Rican folklore. As a black, Puerto Rican (Caribbean) woman that is actively claiming female citizenship and embodying the intersections of race, sexuality, and class, Isabel la Negra is posthumously living in limbo. Living in the limbo of the very intersections that she embodies, Isabel, in all of her variations, provides a version of wholeness, albeit idiosyncratic, that destabilizes the hegemonic conception of corporeal integrity and rewrites wholeness through an attachment to a specific past. By reviving and revising her image, Ferré, Ramos Otero, and Santos-Febres reconstruct a past that dignifies Isabel’s mythical legacy in the Puerto Rican imaginary. Offering a syncopated interpretation of Isabel’s life, these texts exhume
intricate layers of complimentary fragments that dialogue with each other in order to provide a robust, full-bodied illustration of the woman herself.

Published together in the September 1974 edition of their critically acclaimed literary magazine, *Zona de carga y descarga*, Rosario Ferré’s “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” and Manuel Ramos Otero’s “La última plena que bailó Luberza” provide a literary legacy for the infamous Puerto Rican prostitute who was mysteriously assassinated on January 4, 1974. Setting out on a dialogic mission to recover the details missing from journalistic and historical depictions of Isabel’s life and death, Ferré and Otero recuperate the fragments of fact and fiction in order to provide a sense of wholeness for the legendary madam. Riffing on Isabel’s metaphorical dismemberment from society, Ferré and Otero both choose to dismember their own texts from the literary canon by anchoring their short stories in Puerto Rico’s popular music form, the plena.

As a symbol of national identity, Puerto Rico’s plena genre is known for its humble beginnings in Ponce’s community of San Antón. Like Isabel la Negra, the plena tradition hales from contested origins, emerging between the years 1915 and 1921. Historically associated with the racially mixed working class communities of Puerto Rico’s coastal areas and urban suburbs (Kuss 172), the plena was a display of imagination and spontaneity, a creative amalgam of the African-derived *bomba*, a troubadour’s chronicling composition, and syncopated body movements. But what was especially novel about the *plena* was that its subtext brought the unspeakable African presence to the center of the seigniorial city of Ponce, whose splendid port and booming sugar economy won it the epithet of Puerto Rico’s ‘Southern Pearl.’ (Amador de Jesús 249)
In spite of its eventual adaptation into a widely popularized and polemicized dance music, the plena remains infamous for the social commentary that it offers and the historical memory that it preserves:

Although by the late 1930s most of Puerto Rico’s middle class could dance to the popular plena, underlying every note and every verbal inflection were histories of racial prejudice, sexual regulation, and municipal policing. (Amador de Jesús 249)

The unspeakable histories that are re/presented in the lyrics and subtexts of the plena speak to the silencing of La Negra’s past as well as the anti-patriarchal nuances that drive the literary works reimagining her life. Like several critics before me, I find that this musical genre offers a productive framework for thinking through Isabel’s various literary portraits given the entangled histories of prostitution and plena in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Like the prostitute, Isabel la Negra, the plena “destabilized middle-class family order and racial hierarchies in the island” while offering a “polyphony of conflicts over the use of popular culture as a system of representation from which communal and national identifications are derived and acted out” (Amador de Jesús 268).

During the early twentieth century, the plena’s unspeakable past unraveled in tandem with that of Puerto Rico’s prostitution. As patriarchy’s greatest antagonists, the tradition of plena and the practice of prostitution threatened the foundation of la gran familia and destabilized the core values of a society in limbo. Trapped between colonialism and independence, Puerto Rico’s post-slave society perpetuated a pattern of surveillance and a practice of containment that intended to stamp out the immoral nature of public leisure. Policing female bodies and relocating commercial dance spaces to the city’s periphery, Ponce’s “moralizing forces” (Amador de Jesús 262) transformed the urban landscape into a social “battlefield” (263): “In an attempt to make prostitutes less
visible—and hence the *plaena* less audible—municipal efforts concentrated on their containment and relocation away from central residential areas” (255). Countermanding this model of containment, Isabel la Negra’s textual presence speaks to the literary liberation and wide diffusion that Ferré, Ramos Otero, and Santos-Febres have provided for her legacy.

Through their joint efforts and distinct portrayals of a woman that was marginalized by her race, gender, and class, Ferré and Otero deliver a pair of social commentaries revealing what Stuart Hall describes as the “dialectic of cultural struggle.” In his seminal essay, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” Hall maps out the field of culture as a “constant battlefield” upon which the tension between popular culture and dominant culture is performed through resistance and supersession (447). With respect to Ferré’s short story, this dialectical cultural struggle is most aptly portrayed by the division between Isabel Luberza and Isabel la Negra. In Otero’s work, the struggle manifests between indomitability and vulnerability, showcasing the complexities of Isabel’s character on the last day of her life. In their intricate revisions of a past unrecorded, both texts function in a manner akin to the plena, offering a revised history and a social critique that appropriates the musical tradition while refashioning the typically male dominated genre to accommodate women.

In her short story, “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres,” Ferré reimagines Isabel’s split subjectivity through a duet of dueling voices that resurrects an unspeakable history of female subjection and patriarchal violence. I pun on the duel/duet metaphors here in order to buttress the innate musicality of the story’s title, structure, and thematic

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92 Ferré’s story has been examined through various lenses, which include bipolar disorder, the Hegelian Other, and Girard’s triangular desire.
composition. As Isabel Balseiro points out, the story’s structure parallels that of a plena duet: “Stylistically, the text follow the pattern of the music: throughout the narrative two voices are heard, sometimes a single voice dominates, sometimes the voices unite in duet and, finally, the two merge into one” (4). Furthermore, Ferré constructs her narrative around two competing images of the same Isabel—Isabel Luberza, Ambrosio's virginal white widow and Isabel la Negra—Ambrosio's uninhibited black lover. While the white Isabel is endowed with a rich aristocratic lineage of Spanish bloodlines, black Isabel is juxtaposed as her antithesis: an orphan, metaphorically dismembered from genealogy and society, with no biological kinship to claim.

Divided and united by their love for the same man, Isabel Luberza and Isabel la Negra grapple with each other's relationship to Ambrosio while contemplating their shared rights to his legacy. As Aparicio asserts, in this narrative, “Women fighting against each other for the love or property of a man signals a patriarchal strategy that glorifies the masculine ego while it subjugates women by keeping them disjointed, divided” (50). Weaving each woman's stream of consciousness together with the stabilizing voice of an omniscient narrator, Ferré excavates the intersection of race, class, and gender through a series of popular Puerto Rican stereotypes and racial binaries that confine each Isabel—Luberza and la Negra—to the patriarchal constructions of the Madonna and the whore, respectively. By introducing the two Isabels in this binary fashion, Ferré initiates a discourse of doubling that speaks to the tropes of fragmentation and split subjectivity underscoring her text. In her essay entitled, “On Love and Politics,” Ferré expands on her use of the double as a feminine prototype [that] has a political purpose: to question the values of patriarchal society, which imposes on women an irreconcilable fragmentation
of their personality—what they feel themselves to be and what they perceive society wants them to be. (Ferré 8)

The double that Ferré presents in this story ultimately countermands and subverts the patriarchal order that fragments each female character in the first place. Despite the racial identities and socially constructed differences that drive the women’s rivalry, there is a common bond of oppression stemming from patriarchy.

Ferré alludes to this marianista binary immediately, opening her short story with two epigraphs that establish a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. The first epigraph contains a series of lyrics extracted from the popular anonymous plena, “Plena de San Antón” while the second includes a biblical excerpt from Saint Paul’s “Epistle to the Corinthians”:

La puta que yo conozco
no es de la china ni del japón
porque la puta viene de ponce
viene del barrio san antón
plena de san antón

conocemos sólo en parte, pero
cuando llegue lo perfecto
desaparecerá lo parcial ahora
vemos por un espejo y oscuramente,
pero entonces veremos cara a cara.
SAN PABLO, primera epistola
a los corintios, XII, 12, conocida también como epístola de amor.

Following Aparicio’s claims with regard to the first epigraph, Ferré puts forth a rewriting of the original plena lyrics, “la plena que yo conozco,” by “substituting plena for puta, a strategy that emphasizes the underlying feminization and erotization of the musical form” (49). This interpretation supports Aparicio’s subsequent reading of Ferré’s story, which

93 Marianismo is the female counterpart of the machismo tradition. Constructing female gender roles around purity and morality, marianismo refers to the virgin in the virgin-whore dichotomy.
deconstructs Isabel la Negra as the personification of plena and Isabel Luberza as the embodiment of danza. While the plena lyrics allude to Isabel la Negra, the biblical epigraph, on the other hand, speaks to Isabel Luberza and introduces a rhetoric of fragmentation that is implicit in the quest for wholeness. Foreshadowing the split subjectivity and eventual fusion that Ferré develops through each woman’s interior monologue, this excerpt puts forth the symbol of the mirror as an optimistic resolution for the Isabela’s interpersonal struggle. It also offers a pretextual buttress for the following statement, directed at the late Ambrosio:

Al fin y al cabo no ha de parecer tan extraño todo esto, es casi necesario que sucediera como sucedió. Nosotras, tu querida y tu mujer, siempre hemos sabido que debajo de cada dama de sociedad se oculta una prostituta…Porque nosotras siempre hemos sabido que cada prostituta es una dama en potencia… (23)

In spite of the marianista dichotomy reinforced by these epigraphs, there is a commonality or shared experience that is embedded in the story’s title phrase and popular plena lyrics “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres.” The division or gap inspired by the Isabela’s antagonism is bridged by the story’s title, which reminds the reader that both Isabela are wounded women who have been pinned against each other in order to win a man’s love and affection. Tracing this development from the story’s opening title to final resolution, I flesh out this concurrence as a protest against the patriarchal constructions to which each woman has been confined. According to Balseiro,

The juxtaposition of their respective desires shows the shortcomings of the roles into which they have been cast and offers the possibility of change. The process of fusion of those desires reveals the liberated self in construction. In order to be whole and emancipated, women cannot allow themselves to be restricted to such categories such as ‘whore’ or ‘Madonna’ but must demystify those categories. (Balseiro 5)

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94 These lyrics were appropriated and popularized by king of plena, Manuel Jiménez (Canario).
By the end of the story, the fragmentation caused by social constructions and patriarchal expectations is translated into a source of wholeness and the antagonism is transformed into an integral alliance. As Balseiro further explains, “Isabel la Negra and Isabel Luberza are complementary parts of the same woman, and only through the integration of their respective personalities does a whole human being emerge” (Balseiro 3). The vocal syncopation that was originally established to emphasize the duality of a split or doubled Isabel is erased and a psychic fusion ensues; an intricate process of re-membering is activated, leaving the reader questioning reality and representation, as well as the politics of identity.

Like that of Ferré, Ramos Otero’s short story, “La última plena que bailó Luberza,” roots itself in the plena tradition while navigating the fragmented memories that shape Isabel’s last day of life. Fragmenting his narrative with seven time-stamped segments, Otero walks his reader through Frau Luberza’s intricate and intimate stream of consciousness, which coexists alongside the voice of an interventional third-person narrator. Imitating the improvisational and responsorial stylings of the plena, Otero’s story appropriates the genre’s lyrical structure, alternating between Luberza’s monologues and the narrator’s clarifying perspective:

Es decir, la historia pareciera asumir la forma responsorial tan propia de la plena ya que la función del narrador es la de aclarar lo que está sucediendo, respondiendo a los monólogos del personaje y revelando hechos de la vida de Luberza…(Simonovis 72)

In addition to inspiring the story’s structure, the plena operates as an instrument of intertextuality in the narrative, scoring Luberza’s dreamscapes and flooding her conscious thoughts with pop-cultural references and historical markers, such as the day that they cut Elena (“el mismo día que cortaron a Elena”) (60). While anchoring the story
in a specific Puerto Rican reality, the plenas contribute to the construction of an imaginary space that enhances Luberza’s mythical characterization.

Referring to his protagonist as Frau Luberza rather than Isabel la Negra, Otero commands a sense of reverence and respect for the established madam, while contributing to the panorama of voices that beget Isabel’s full-bodied legacy in the counter-canon. Otero portrays Frau Luberza Oppenheimer as a seventy-two year-old woman in her final hours of life. Intertwining his protagonist’s dreamscapes, visions, and conscious thoughts, Otero hints at the protagonist’s haunting premonitions of and growing vulnerability to death. Although she is a domineering woman, traversing Ponce’s city streets in her limousine and paying her way into heaven with hefty donations to the Catholic Church, Frau Luberza walks with a cane and depends on the assistance of her dama, Miseria, to monitor her business and maintain her physical appearance:

Miseria ayuda a incorporarme. Me maquilla el rostro sin dejar de hablar un momento. Me rejuvenece y hace que los 72 años de Frau Luberza parezcan los 45 años de una mujer madura por la experiencia de la vida…Miseria me para y aprueba que ya me parezco a Frau Luberza. (Otero 58)

Physically transforming Frau Luberza into the image of a rejuvenated but mature matriarch, Miseria is described as an adoptive daughter for the madam and thus a future recipient of her inheritance: “pienso que le tengo cariño a la loca, que casi es una hija para mí, que todas sus paterías sofisticadas son maquinaciones de mujer, que a lo mejor esa loca debiera tener un pedacito de mi herencia” (Otero 58). Sensing that death is upon her, Luberza entrusts Miseria with her vanity and a portion of her inheritance as an act of kinning that designates an adoptive community within the space of Frau Luberza’s Dancing Hall.
Narrating the hours of limbo marking her transition from life to death, “La última plena que bailó Luberza” traces the roots of Isabel la Negra’s immortalized legacy back to Luberza’s volatile, mortal body. Playing with Luberza’s deteriorating physical state and elevated social status, Otero approximates her mythologized memory through the construction of a phallic female. Ironically undermining and reinforcing her corporeal fragility and physical degradation, Frau Luberza’s cane is a phallic symbol that offers physical support and metaphorical empowerment: “el bastón de marfil con mango de onix labrado cuyos en rejillados confusos revelan un nido de víboras con lenguas viperinas de rubies” (50). Decorated with ruby-encrusted vipers, Luberza’s lavish cane is indicative of the threat that she presents to hegemonic society and the patriarchal construction of womanhood. As dangerous as the poisonous snakes adorning her cane, Luberza’s persona is borderline mythical, instilling fear in the men that cross her path by challenging their masculinity with her own sense of machismo: “se necesita tener mucho cojón para atreverse con Frau Luberza Oppenheimer…ningún macho es más macho que Frau Luberza” (61, 62). By writing Luberza in this way, Otero manipulates the social constructions that dictate race, class, and gender in Puerto Rican society and debunks the triple jeopardy that his protagonist undoubtedly faces as a black female prostitute.

Luberza’s phallic façade proves precarious, however, as the reader grows better acquainted with the tragedies marking her past. In an effort to save face, Luberza imprints her romantic history and emotional vulnerability on to the female dog that she hears howling outside her bedroom on the eve of her death. Mourning the loss of their male counterparts in this contemplative scene, Frau Luberza and the grieving stray dog are juxtaposed as parallel embodiments of female suffering. Drenched in the desperate
cries of the widowed canine, Frau Luberza reflects upon her own widow status while the narrator guides the reader through a fragmented genealogy of lovers. As Luberza’s tragic romantic history unfolds, her stalwart character grows more vulnerable and more human; Otero depicts her devotion to santería and demonstrates how the disappointment of death and the pain of abandonment slowly chip away at the mythical, phallic façade that she presents to the public. In the end, all of Frau Luberza’s failed relationships result in misery, which resonates with her close ties to the dama turned adoptive daughter, Miseria.

Immediately following this segment of intimacy and vulnerability is the narrator’s account of Luberza’s business expertise and astute negotiations. Strategically positioned, this segment reappropriates Luberza’s phallic female persona and re-presents her as an indomitable forced to be reckoned with. Making its final vocal appearance in the story, the narrator seems to be using this segment to bolster and preserve Luberza’s stature in the national imaginary, strengthening the phallic foundation that started to crumble in the previous section. The narrator’s ultimate disappearance signals resolution—a resolution that mends the vocal and perspectival fragmentation that initially ruptured the narrative. Analogous to the psychic fusion depicted in Ferré’s short story, the narrator’s abrupt disappearance in Otero’s text can be read in conjunction with Luberza’s subsequent death, suggesting and foreshadowing a unifying process that occurs once their presence has expired.

The lack of information about Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer undoubtedly affords a more critical construction of her imaginary existence, which inevitably reflects the creative and sociopolitical inflections of each author. I am particularly interested in the
ways that the tropes of dismemberment and limbo abound in her diverse fictional portrayals, carried over from one version of her life to another. By stepping away from the individual texts and reflecting upon them as a collective corpus, I find that the authors are engaging in a process of re-membering that allows them to fill the gaps of Isabel’s personal genealogy with a robust literary genealogy. By re-membering a body that has been dismembered from mainstream society and the archives, the authors and their texts conceive a literary body that contributes to the transmission of a particular history and the diffusion of Puerto Rican folklore. I open and close this project with texts that are staged in Puerto Rico in order to draw attention back to the experience of living in limbo. As an island floating between the First and Third Worlds, independence and statehood, colonialism and post-colonialism, Spanish and English, Puerto Rico's plural status is translated throughout its literary landscape and imprinted on the characters depicted in the works I discuss over the course of this dissertation.

In the introduction of this work, I present El Gran Caribe as a full but fragmented vision of a geographical region whose gaps reflect the bodily and genealogical lacunae that are embossed on the characters analyzed throughout this dissertation. Even though the bodies marked and maimed by violence are symbolic of the fragmented histories and genealogies from which they emerge, they ironically tend to be each novel’s most complete, full-bodied, and historically aware characters. Stemming from my centripetal perspective on El Gran Caribe, this interpretation echoes Torres-Saillant’s model, which imagines fragmentation as coherence: “Fragmentation need not be tragic…It can actually provide a principle of coherence in so far as it induces in the Caribbean artist a compulsion to sew the pieces together” (The Cross-Cultural Unity, 59). Within the
context of the novels discussed in this dissertation, the Caribbean writer is compelled to mend broken and dismembered bodies with the suturing structure of the adoptive community. Acting as a connective tissue, the matrifocal model of the adoptive community offers recourse to victims of physical, emotional, genealogical, and/or epistemic violence.

Focusing on the Hispanophone Caribbean, this dissertation differs from previous scholarship by expanding upon the limb/o metaphor and examining orphaned characters through the constructs of dismemberment and re-memberment. My work ultimately contributes to the critical dialogue on Caribbean genealogies by uncovering the tropes of violence, vulnerability, and fragmentation that are inscribed on the body. Using corporeal modalities other than race to understand the Caribbean experience, this dissertation initiates a rethinking of limb/o as both bodily condition and privileged poly-perspectival space.
Bibliography


