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Somos Familia: Family as an Organizing Trope in 20th-21st Century Latina/o Literature

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SOMOS FAMILIA:
FAMILY AS AN ORGANIZING TROPE IN 20th-21st CENTURY U.S. LATINA/O LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines various ways that family has been employed as a model of both oppression and liberation in Latina/o literature. Working from an interdisciplinary standpoint at the crossroads of literary and cultural studies, women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, Chicano/a studies, and Latino/a studies, this project seeks to uncover how representations of *familia* in U.S. Latino/a literary texts accomplish their discursive work, as well as complicating conventional formulations of kinship and family.

I examine *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, in Chapter One, in terms of queer family and the counter-domestic logic of “the streets.” In Chapter Two, I explore the ways that nationalism and family are intertwined in two Cuban American texts: *The Agüero Sisters*, by Cristina García, and *We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* by Achy Obejas. In Chapter Three, I use narratology as a way to examine the workings of patriarchy as a means of controlling the truth in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Finally, I examine the trajectory of Cherríe Moraga’s body of work in Chapter Four, from *This Bridge Called My Back* to *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, arguing that Moraga’s work, like a spirograph, spirals back to similar themes about family and identity while also changing significantly as she ages.
Each chapter employs different spatial frameworks to approach the texts, reflecting not only the heterogeneity of the work itself, but also the varied uses of “family” as a trope. In examining how these texts complicate chronology, authority, ethnicity, and heteronormativity, this dissertation argues for new, feminist possibilities for kinship beyond conventional domesticity.
INTRODUCTION:
BLOOD, KINSHIP, AND FAMILY IN LATINA/O LITERATURE

The personal is political.
--Popular second-wave feminist slogan

Feminists have often been accused of trying to impose their view of the family on everyone else. But a feminism that demands equal protection for every person’s own imaginary domain does the opposite.
--Drucilla Cornell, At The Heart of Freedom

I would not have to reach far to find recent examples of “the family” being used to justify all kinds of things that seem to have little to do with it, from conceal-and-carry laws to legislation against public funding of women’s health clinics to advertising for diapers, organic food, and laundry detergent. “Mommy blogs” consistently dispense normative visions of family life (the hubby,” a relatively disinterested consumer of the writer’s creations, and “the kids,” canvases for the writer’s experiments, are commonly recurring characters) in addition to homemade jam instructions and do-it-yourself lotion recipes. These normative families are almost always white, middle-class, and heterosexual.¹ Mainstream news media, too, default to a vision of “American family” that is white, middle-class, and heterosexual, as the media discourse around tragedies like Michael Brown’s murder, Dylann Roof’s racist terrorist attack on a Black Charleston church, and Donald Trump’s insistence that undocumented Mexican immigrants are

¹ Of course, some companies defy these stereotypes in some respects, as in a 2013 Cheerios commercial that featured a multi-racial family. (The racist backlash against this ad on the Internet was furious.) Still, one would be hard-pressed to find a poor, minority, gay family as the subject of a national advertising campaign.
rapists and drug dealers suggest. Brown, who is Black, was immediately scrutinized for signs of delinquency that would justify the actions of the police officer who shot and killed him while he was unarmed, while Roof, who is white, was painted as a disturbed individual acting suffering from mental illness. Trump, for his part, stands by his inaccurate statements and continues to enjoy media attention as a potential candidate in the 2016 U.S. presidential race.

Alongside these normative visions of family are queer and non-normative uses of the word. Identifying someone as “family” has long been used to connote membership in queer communities, as in “Is she straight?” “No, she’s family.” Few things are more powerful than the concepts of brotherhood, sisterhood, and being “one of the family,” in part because the family is the site of our earliest memories and experiences. It also partakes in a fantasy of continuity and safety; we don’t choose our families, the cliché goes, but neither can we move on from them, unlike in other relationships; someone can be an ex-lover or ex-friend, but rarely an ex-brother or ex-mother. For these reasons, “family” is a node of meaning in our culture that could benefit from close examination. The project of this dissertation, then, is not only to trace family as a trope being deployed in U.S. Latino/a literature, but also to question why and how it has been deployed and what work it accomplishes.

Reading U.S. Latino/a literature with an eye toward how it engages with the concepts of family, kinship, and queerness is a timely and feminist project. My dissertation takes as a given that families, whether they are broken, extended, happy, or adopted, are fundamental parts of identity formation. Though there are many studies of the family from feminist perspectives, it is less common to see the family examined as a
shaping trope in contemporary literature in the same way that race, gender, sex, and class are. This is a shame, in my view, since, as a nexus of people coming together in ways that are both overt and subtle, the family, a conceptual point where gender, race, and class all intersect, is an incredibly rich site of critical inquiry. Invoked as a source of oneness and coherence, family ties often create messy alliances across identifications. Family is the place where either mixture or purity is located, and it is also a model of gender domination. Family can also be—and often is, especially in Latino/a literature—a source of warmth, strength, and love at the same time that it can be repressive and suffocating. Familial closeness—and the presence of extended family members in the household—is stereotypically associated with Latinos/as; one of my aims here is to complicate this stereotype of Latino families. Especially for queer Latinos/as, family is often a source of anxiety, because there is an obligation to be involved in family in a certain, heteronormative way. (I use the term “queer” throughout this dissertation to indicate not only non-heterosexual genders and sexualities, but non-heteronormativity in other arenas as well. Thus, my use of “queer” is broad, but this broad definition, like my definition of “family,” allows for unconventional comparisons that are nonetheless true—or truer—to the multifaceted experience of life in the United States.)

Latinos/as are often assumed to “really” value family—and this assumption comes from both inside and outside the group. In my own experience, when I would answer good-natured questions about what field my Ph.D. was in and what my dissertation was about with the reply that I was studying the family in Latino/a literature, most people would immediately assume that I was studying a self-evident fact, and that I was studying actual people, not books, in spite of the fact that I always mention the word
“literature” in my brief description of my Ph.D. work. Undoubtedly, my own identity as an Anglo white woman plays a part in what others feel they are “allowed” to say to me, and also possibly suggests a certain academic distance from my subject to onlookers, as though, not being Latina myself, I have no stake in the family and its various deployments in U.S. Latina/o literature. These knee-jerk responses also seem to bespeak a very deep-seated idea of who Latinos are: brown, immigrant, working class, conservative Catholic. “Latino/a,” however, can describe a person of any race, religion, or class status, and certainly does describe many Americans whose ancestors have lived in what we now call the United States for centuries. (For that matter, stereotypes of close-knit immigrant families who resist assimilation into Anglo-American society are not limited to Latinos/as, but are applied across the board.)

The term Latino/a itself implies a stereotypical pan-ethnic family, encompassing not only immigrants from all nineteen separate countries in Latin America to the United States, but also populations of people who have lived in what we now know as the United States for generations, as well. Latinidad, the quality of being Latino/a, furthermore, is not something that every Latino/a cares to claim, preferring instead, for example, the terms Chicano/a, Puerto Rican/Boricua, or a hyphenated national identity tag (e.g. Mexican-American). As Marta Caminero-Santangelo has noted, the notion of the existence of a quality called “Latinidad,” or a single ethnic group called “Latino,” is “never unproblematic” (“Latinidad” 21). According to Caminero-Santangelo, most

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2 This conception is not limited to U.S. Latinas/os; many people in Latin American countries, notably Mexico, understand themselves as mestizo—that is, racially mixed between Spaniards and indigenous American peoples. In Mexico, mestizaje has long been invoked as a unifying concept around which to build national identity. Indeed, the casta (caste) paintings that the Spanish made during the sixteenth century denoting the various “kinds” of mixture that resulted from different sexual pairings often depicted their subjects as part of a family.
scholars agree that such a label is a direct result of various national and ethnic groups’ shared experiences of life and racism in the United States, as well as a result of the perception from without the group that all groups under the banner of “Latino” (or “Hispanic”) are “the same”—hence, the resistance to such a label, which has been associated with racist homogenizing of various cultures and communities. “[P]anethnicity can be understood as running counter to the driving energies of both Puerto Rican and Chicano cultural nationalisms of the 1960s-1970s” Caminero-Santangelo notes, since these movements were “by definition” concerned with “the cultural legacies of their respective nations of origin” (17).

However, in spite of these shortcomings, “Latino/a” increasingly functions as a description of a shared culture, as Frances Aparicio argues; recent waves of immigration to traditionally mono-Latino cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Miami (as well as the growing Latino populations of cities like Chicago, which have always been multi-Latino demographically) means that U.S. Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Cuban Americans live next to and interact with each other as well as with Salvadoran, Ecuadorean, Guatemalan, and other U.S. Latino groups much more than they have in the past (Aparicio 625-626). I myself use the term “Latino/a” not only because it is increasingly descriptive of a shared culture as this demographic group grows in the United States, but also because it enables certain cross-cultural comparisons that I find fruitful. I am far from uncritically welcoming the brave new world of pan-ethnic Latino/a identity, however; like all stories about family, it is important to keep in mind that the story of “Latino/a family” demands close examination and critical analysis.
As an umbrella term, “family,” like “Latina/o,” covers a multitude of racial, class, ethnic, and national identifications and includes a diversity of sexual and gender identities. Examining the way that family, patriarchy, authority, and queerness are deployed in Latino/a literature opens up a space for rethinking the status quo. Several feminist thinkers have been formative to my own theorizing on the subject of family structures and kinship: Donna Haraway’s work on companion species, race, and biology; Drucilla Cornell’s work on family structures; and Judith Butler’s work on kinship, gender, and sexuality have all influenced the way I think about family as well as the way I approach social categorizing and personal identifications. José Esteban Muñoz and J. Jack (Judith) Halberstam have breathed life into this project in its later stages. Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous articulation of the “mestiza consciousness” has been both a springboard and a whetstone for my own thoughts on family, feminism, and Latina/o identity. Because of my own training and background, my project situates itself at the crossroads of feminist philosophical thought about family and kinship with Latino/a literary and cultural criticism. This is not the only road to Rome, of course, but it is the road I am best equipped to travel.

Donna Haraway has long been invested in questioning the conventional family romance that structures so much of society, and her work shows both the importance of “family” as a structuring principle and the necessity of subjecting that construct to close scrutiny. In her essays “Race: Universal Donors In A Vampire Culture. It’s All In The Family: Biological Kinship Categories In The Twentieth Century United States” (1995) and “Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience” (2003), Haraway articulates a vision of kinship that is both “more and less” than blood ties,
reproduction, and identity (“Race” 285). Haraway moves away from the cyborg figuration in “Cyborgs to Companion Species” in part because the cyborg is no longer completely appropriate for the feminist task at hand: “I have come to see cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species” she claims (300). In both essays, it is clear that “family” is limiting in itself; she prefers to talk more about kinship and companion species than “family” per se. Yet the familiar/familial is inescapable, implied by the word “kinship” as well as bluntly implicated in the notion of companion species, as in the quote above.

Donna Haraway may seem an unlikely person to bring into a discussion of Latina/o literature. As she herself says, some dismiss her work as “the ramblings of a blissed-out, technobunny, fembot” (Haraway 3); these critics might charge that the concepts she discusses are happening on some abstract plane removed from “real life,” especially since Haraway herself leads a life of relative privilege. Certainly, though Haraway has invoked the work of women of color feminism (notably Cherríe Moraga and Audre Lorde) and sees her work as part of feminist and anti-racist projects, she is not widely cited in Latino/a literary criticism. Yet her radical emphasis on expanding, opening, rethinking, reforming, and rewriting her work on kinship as her opinions and knowledge shift and grow serves as a model of self-reflexive, feminist scholarship. Then, too, Haraway’s understanding that there is no nature outside of culture, but only “natureculture,” helps in the endeavor to reconceptualize seemingly natural concepts like family and mother-child relationships (Haraway 298).

3 Thanks to Suzanne Bost, who works with the Gloria Anzaldúa archive, and informs me that Anzaldúa’s unpublished writings from when she was studying with Haraway at UCSC do, indeed, cite Haraway.
Because it brings together feminist questions about the nature of equality and justice as well as being concerned with race, inheritance, identity, and reproduction in the eyes of the state, Drucilla Cornell’s work about family and kinship is foundational to my thinking on the family. In the interview “A Return for the Future,” Cornell reiterates over and over that the failure of communism or socialism in any given situation does not let feminists “off the hook”; feminism is still responsible, in her view, for figuring out how to change society, or in other words, for continuing to imagine a future that is not exactly like the present—including the lines drawn around sex, race, and class. Cornell’s concept of the “imaginary domain” paradoxically enables one to “[recognize] that as persons we have many basic identifications: language, race, ethnicity, sexual difference” while also allowing for reimagining the boundaries of those identifications (“Return” 440). Because it is imaginary but also a domain, “the horizon can always be reimagined and, therefore, although there are parameters to your life that I am calling basic identifications, they, too, can always be reimagined” (440). Concomitant with the “imaginary domain” is the idea of one’s “sexuate being.” For Cornell, the usefulness of this phrase is that it keeps sex/gender identifications at a level of abstraction, which enables conversation about representation of one’s own person to the state, while distancing individuals from the roles that patriarchal, capitalist kinship creates for them.

Although Cornell states that our most “basic identifications” can be reimagined, she is also careful to point out that this is not simple or necessarily the prerogative of everybody. For example, as the Anglo mother of a Latina daughter, she acknowledges the constructedness of race while also emphasizing the importance of things like ethnicity and nationality. “[W]e’re always going to be renegotiating those categories” she says
(443). However, she goes on to point out that it is not her “place” (a word in scare quotes within the interview itself) to “[renegotiate] the meaning of ‘Latina’”; that is a prerogative that belongs to her daughter as a person who will be identified as “Latina” by society (443). Similarly, one cannot get away from the responsibility of representing oneself through these “basic identifications” like “Anglo” and “white” (441). This is a responsibility and not just a matter of fancy or whim in part because these identifications “mean something in the United States at this time” (441). Thus Cornell, in this interview and elsewhere, is actively negotiating a space that allows for reimagining while at the same time acknowledging the meaning that identifications already carry. “The crucial question would not be how you were oppressed and how you experienced your oppression, but rather whether I have the right to represent my own sexuate being” (443). Cornell’s articulation of the importance of being able to determine one’s own “sexuate being” effectively avoids the reifying of difference to which identity politics can lead, while also creating a crucially necessary space to imagine new identifications. I find this idea particularly useful in reading and theorizing about Latino/a literature, as it makes the connections among race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, and all the other myriad kinds of identifications more fluid and, perhaps paradoxically, more abstract, while still remaining grounded in the subject’s experience of reality. Because “Latino/a” is an “ethnic” group that, in fact, can contain any number of ethnicities or races, retaining space to rethink and reimagine categories is especially crucial here.

Like Cornell’s work, Judith Butler’s revolves around the subject’s relation to the law and the state. In “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” Butler considers the double-edged sword of state sanction of particular relationships. French family law
provides Butler with an example to bring children and race into this discussion of sexual possibilities. Butler presents French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski’s notion that a child’s “double origin” in mother and father is natural, and provides a “cultural and symbolic foundation” for the child (Agacinski as qtd. in Butler 118). Reading this throwback attitude towards reproduction and sexual difference as a “resurgence of a largely anachronistic structuralism,” Butler explains that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory exogamy also function here as ways to ensure the reproduction of the “clan,” in Lévi-Straussian terms; “fears about immigration” are linked, however subconsciously, to “desires to regulate nonheterosexual kinship,” in France in this example, but elsewhere, too (121). Thus the politics of immigration, national purity, and eugenics are linked to the debates about who shall be included in the norm of marriage. Because all three theorists—Haraway, Cornell, and Butler—emphasize the importance of imagining kinship configurations that are currently non-normalized or not articulated and show that it is impossible to talk about kinship without also talking about race, they form a crucial point of departure for me.

In Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics, Richard T. Rodríguez writes about issues of family and sexuality in Chicano/a culture, focusing on the cultural production of the Chicano nationalist movement that began in the 1960s and 1970s. Rodríguez positions his project in line with Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby and others who “stake their claims at the crossroads of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (9-10). Like the concept of race for Omi and Winant, Rodríguez argues that “la familia” is neither an “illusion” to move beyond nor a “fixed…biological datum” (12). Important for my purposes, Rodriguez maps the ways that vilification or dismissal of feminism and
“heteropatriarchal articulations of cultural nationalism” have sometimes been intertwined in Chicano/a cultural production, and how examining the discursive work that “familia” does highlights the interconnection of categories of identity. This work’s insights and critical moves have inspired and guided my own work. Like Rodríguez’s, my project “[scrutinizes] who and what counts as la familia” (2), but instead of Chicano/a cultural production, my dissertation takes on the category of Latino/a literature. This is an important shift, since these literatures are increasingly compared to each other and grouped together under the assumption that they have something in common (more so than other modern prose); because the metaphor of family is applied not only to Chicanos/as or Puerto Ricans, but to all Latinos/as, beginning the critical work of bringing these texts into conversation is an important step.

Though I discuss their work in more detail in Chapters One and Two, Judith Halberstam and José Muñoz have also indelibly shaped this project. Halberstam’s articulations of queer time and space and queer failure have encouraged me to look for meaning making in the negative spaces of discourses. Muñoz, on the other hand, provides an absolutely critical intervention in “antirelational” queer readings to re-focus queerness on the future, on the horizon. Akin to Chicana feminist responses to Anglo feminisms, Muñoz’s insights in Cruising Utopia open up space between queer studies and ethnic studies that drives this project in many ways. Muñoz’s work is situated firmly in both queer studies and Latino/a studies, challenging both disciplines to expand their conceptualizations of what is possible in the future. I find Muñoz’s insistence “that the present…is not enough” an inspiration for the work I do in this dissertation (Muñoz 100).
Because she is so widely cited both within Chicana feminist, Latino/a, and feminist/women’s studies (and even college composition classes), I wish to close this theoretical section of my Introduction with a meditation on Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa’s theory of the “new mestiza” articulated in *Borderlands* engages ideas of family, race, and belonging, arguing for alternative structures and figurations of difference. Anzaldúa’s articulation of a “tolerance for ambiguity” through a spiritual, sexual, and physical/biological *mestizaje* (mixture) in *Borderlands* (especially chapters 5 and 7: “How To Tame A Wild Tongue” and “*La conciencia de la mestiza*/Towards a New Consciousness”) has long been attractive to scholars, students, and writers outside of Chicana/o studies, because it lends itself quite readily—even encourages—discussion of metaphysical and non-geographical “borderlands.” In fact, as a result of this enthusiastic adoption of Anzaldúa into the hybridity fold, some Latino/a scholars, such as José Limón in *American Encounters*, respond negatively to Anzaldúa’s work as too utopian (and perhaps too ready to blend/bridge differences) to be really useful politically (Limón 157). It is certainly true that Anzaldúa’s work can be and has been co-opted to support just the sort of “[collapse] into vacuity and abstraction” that Pérez-Torres and others warn against (26). What saves Anzaldúa’s work itself from this “empty abstraction” (Limón 157) is, I argue, is her consistent emphasis on family. Her father, *la tierra madre/tierra natal*, and images of blood and pregnancy anchor her poetry and prose to the specific experience of a Chicana woman in the Río Grande Valley of Texas.

*Borderlands/La Frontera*’s often-neglected poetry sheds more light on the knotty issue of family, blood, and belonging. “*Cultures*” points up the sexist underpinnings of
traditional family roles that assign certain tasks to women as well as undermining the idea that the family is an uncomplicated source of strength and cultural affirmation. The poem explicitly asks the reader to see the speaker as digging up a feminized, maternalized, “hard brown earth.” Her “sweat drip[s] onto the swelling mounds” of dirt as she “disinter[s]” traces of the various cultures that have inhabited the Valley: bones, ocean shells, tin cans, “rubber-nippled baby bottles / cans of Spam with twisted umbilicals” (142). By unearthing them, she “overturn[s] the cultures / spawning in Coke bottles / murky and motleyed” (142). The speaker mentions twice that it is her mother who tells her, “Vete”—“Go”—consigning her to the hard labor of digging holes for trash, an attempt to turn refuse into something that will “replenish the soil.” Such work is “beneath” her brothers, who “never helped” with it, and the crossbeams of the laundry line posts (also women’s work) are “crucifixes from earlier graves” (142). Although she has been told that all of this discarded cultural baggage is good for the mother/earth, the culture-agitating speaker notes that nothing but “thistle sage and nettle” grow in her plots (142). Here, the speaker’s mother’s wisdom is undermined by the very source of that wisdom—the “cultures” of the title. Trash is supposed to nourish new life once it rots, but if the “trash” of the culture is sexist or oppressive, then the “hard brown earth” simply cannot process it into something new; it must be “disinterred” and examined, and perhaps, abandoned or replaced with new and nourishing “trash.”

“El Sonavabitche,” on the other hand, demonstrates the way that family can be invoked in an empowering context through the trope of “blood,” in spite of the cultural baggage that the Chicana speaker in “Cultures” finds so problematic. Here, the Chicana schoolteacher demands the wages for a group of Mexican migrant workers without the
appropriate papers who have been cheated out of their due by the Anglo boss—“el sonavabitche” of the title. A nameless “Chicano” migrant worker (whose own poverty is starkly outlined) explains the situation to the speaker, who has seen it “over and over” anyway (150): the boss works them all day long, giving no day of rest, then on payday calls “la migra” so that they are forced to flee without pay or be deported back to Mexico. In her confrontation with the boss, who doubts that she will pass the money on to the workers, she explains, “Sweat money, mister, blood money, / not my sweat, but same blood” (150). The dual significance of “blood” here invokes both kinship (“same blood”) and revenge (“blood money”). Here, the invocation of kinship has enabled the speaker to use her education and relative assimilation to benefit the powerless Mexican workers and sidestep the issues of sexuality and sexism that might otherwise have prevented her from acting on their behalf.

Anzaldúa’s writing, then, usefully frames my approach to Latino/a literature and the family. Not simply reading symptomatically to find “evidence” of machismo or patriarchy, I am more interested in examining what family can do in various contexts than in pinning it down to one definition that concludes that family is either freeing and “good” or oppressive and “bad.” Key to my approach is the assumption that a feminist “lens” is essential, but not sufficient; one might call it an intersectional approach.⁴

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⁴ However, I also must admit that the notion of intersectionality has its limits for me. For one thing, I do not claim to be able to cover everything that everyone finds significant. Undoubtedly, there are intelligent, fair-minded people who will take issue with something within these pages. Then, too, as Sandra Soto says, the image that intersectionality conjures up—of lines crossing each other, meeting in a certain point and nowhere else—is not necessarily the most useful image; it is “perhaps too rigid and exacting a metaphor” to describe complex Latino/a subjectivity (Soto 6). Instead, Soto exhorts scholars to be “wordy,” and not to look for a “shorthand” to describe the complex and dynamic processes of identity formation (6). I have done my best in this project to do exactly that.
The Chapter

The texts represented in this dissertation are by no means the only ones that make sense in a project of this scope. I chose these texts for various reasons—in part, of course, they were chosen because family looms large as a theme in them. But the same could be said for many other texts that did not make the cut. I also chose them, selfishly, for the pleasure they give in reading and, in the comparative chapters, for the ways the texts speak to and past each other. One thing that they all have in common is that they are rarely all grouped together. Piri Thomas stands out as the only mid-century writer represented in this dissertation, but his influential memoir *Down These Mean Streets* calls out to be examined in terms of family and queerness. Then, too, though the gap is smaller between Junot Díaz’s 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Cristina García’s 1997 novel *The Agüero Sisters*, Achy Obejas’ 1994 collection of stories *We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* and Ana Castillo’s 1993 novel *So Far from God*, there is still a noticeable generational gap. Greater still is the time between these texts and Cherríe Moraga’s writings throughout the 1980s. Yet part of the point of this project is to complicate simplistic narratives of linearity and cohesion. These selections show the breadth of Latino/a literature: popular and niche; Chicana, Puerto Rican, and Cuban; urban, suburban, and rural; gay and straight. As the preceding paragraph should make clear, there are many potential points of entry into the body of work I examine; this one is roughly chronological, but complicates chronology at every turn.

Chapter One, “Queer Failure, Social Legibility, and the Logic of the Street,” takes Piri Thomas’ autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets*, a classic in Puerto Rican
and Latina/o literature since its publication in 1967, as its subject. I begin with this novel because its depictions of “street life” are stereotypically representative of what 1960s America assumed about urban, poor, Nuyoricans, while the novel also queerly resists these hegemonic, heteronormative matrices of meaning at various points. Literary critics have often read *Down These Mean Streets* in terms of the racial coming-to-consciousness it details; indeed, this is a huge part of the book, and arguably its defining conflict. Piri’s sense of himself as not-Black in the beginning of the book, since he is part of a Puerto Rican family with a white mother and siblings as well as a dark-skinned father who resists being labeled as “Negro,” slowly changes as Piri grows up, moves in and out of Harlem, and experiences the systematic, overt racism of the United States. Yet concomitant with this racial awakening is a complex and, at times, troubling stance on sexuality and gender that gets less frequent extended critical attention.

I frame my reading of Thomas’ novel with 1960s and 1970s anthropology and sociology on urban, minority poverty as represented by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Oscar Lewis, on the one hand, and on the other, with queer theorists like Halberstam and Muñoz to elucidate, first of all, the ways that Thomas’ memoir is situated in a mid-twentieth-century discourse of the pathology of the minority family, and second of all, the ways that Thomas’ writing queerly resists this pathologization in some ways and capitulates to it in others. Ultimately, I argue, Piri must be rehabilitated in this novel, since to leave him in the queer here-and-now of street life would alienate a wider/whiter readership; yet the ending of the novel does not quite resolve the tension between queerness and recuperation that the novel toggles between throughout. I propose that Thomas’ preoccupation with redemption versus queerness serves as a thematic bridge to
the rest of the chapters, laying a conceptual foundation for the works that follow, even as they depart significantly from the politics and social context of Thomas’ memoir.

In Chapter Two, “The ‘Broken’ Familia Cubana in the Fiction of Cristina García and Achy Obejas,” I examine the often taken-for-granted connection between the concepts of “nation” and “family” in the context of U.S.-Cuba relations. As a metaphor for the nation, the concept of the “family” does much work in nationalist and patriotic discourses. Literary representations of the 1959 Cuban revolution present a fascinating case study in Latina/o literature to explore what happens when the notion of the “happy family” is broken. Much of the political rhetoric around the revolution in the United States figures Fidel Castro as a perverse usurper of power over the beloved motherland, while official Cuban rhetoric shows him as a loving and just hero-father figure, both of which reinforce the nation-as-family trope. In this context, García’s and Obejas’ works’ focus on familial estrangement-as-national estrangement opens up space for a reconsideration of the terms of belonging in family as well as nation.

The Agüero Sisters allegorically depicts a Cuban family split not only by Fidel Castro’s revolution, but by the founding of Cuba itself. Blanca Mestre and Ignacio Agüero, as well as the mysterious “mulatto” who is Reina’s father and the Mestre men who are Blanca’s brothers, rewrite the Cuban national romance as one of patriarchal dominance, but also of suppressed or perverse family members. Further, in the character of Ignacio, the novel represents this patriarchal “romance” as deeply disturbing, not to mention homicidal. Meanwhile, the sisters’ children, Isabel, Dulce, and especially Silvestre, show that family reunions are not necessarily positive or uncomplicated by various kinds of oppression. Though the titular sisters end up reconciled by the end of the
novel, their children and their antecedents complicate a reading of the novel as a hopeful template for reconciliation between Cuban-Americans and Cubans.

In my readings of the stories in *We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*, I use notions of queer time and space and queer futurity to show that the collection interrogates and tries on various ways and means of making familia, trans-ethnically and trans-racially as well as within ethnic, racial, and sex groups, without ever settling on one form of family as “the” one. In its deft combining of concerns about all kinds of social justice, this collection is remarkable and, in light of this remarkableness, somewhat understudied critically. By looking at the collection as a whole, then, united by the theme of family, I aim to fill some of the critical gaps around this work as well as to elaborate on the ways that family has been deployed in Latino/a literature.

Chapter Three examines Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*—two works by two very different authors, published a decade apart—in terms of the ways that they deploy related narrative strategies in order to disrupt a patriarchal order in a specifically Latino/a context. Gerard Genette’s concepts of diegetic, heterodiegetic, and homodiegetic narrators, Susan Lanser’s insights into the feminist politics of narratology, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia all structure this chapter’s arguments about the novels. I also operate on the assumption that normative narration is inextricable from other kinds of normative behavior, particularly gender, sex, and sexuality. I argue that the narrators of both novels disrupt and subvert patriarchal norms about evidence-gathering and authority in ways that require readerly participation.
*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* challenges patriarchal norms of narration and dares readers not to trust the likable Yunior, the narrator, by revealing information about him throughout his narrative that undermines the vision of himself he presents to readers. He begins his tale in a kind of third-person omniscient mode—in narratological terms, as a heterodiegetic narrator—but in the middle of the novel, Chapter 4, he abruptly switches to a first-person point of view and becomes a character at the level of the plot; in other words, he becomes a homodiegetic narrator. This switch, I argue, is key to understanding Yunior’s stance as narrator, particularly his sexism. As Junot Díaz himself has said multiple times in various interviews and talks, Yunior is recreating the very mode of masculinity that he is also lambasting throughout the book by being the only voice speaking. Further, once readers know that the voice of the first three chapters is not actually an omniscient, if streetwise, person above the action of the story, but rather belongs to a character who partakes in the action of the plot, his pronouncements and judgments about the other characters—particularly Oscar—are much harder to take at face-value. I argue that this is part of Díaz’s project to prompt readers to question any story they receive from a single source—even if that source is the extremely likable Yunior. In particular, the stories readers are meant to question are those that naturalize sexism and patriarchy, since Yunior’s narration is ultimately shown to be compromised by his own interests.

Though *So Far from God* uses a slangy and familiar narrative voice to tell its story, like *Oscar Wao*, I argue that this narrator’s very different approach to authority and history enacts an alternative, feminist narrational mode. Both narrators are interested in upsetting readerly complacency, but *So Far from God*’s narrator uses her power to
change limiting stereotypes about Latinas and about feminists, and redefines what counts as legitimate evidence, moving the novel away from Western patriarchal standards of legitimacy into a new, feminist, utopic space. Responding to critical assertions that the novel is “like” a telenovela, I argue that, rather than dwelling in the episodic and melodramatic, as telenovelas do, the novel instead challenges readers to rewrite their own stories in more empowering ways. Each of Sofi’s daughters, Sofi herself, and other characters challenge stereotypes about Latinos/as in the United States and, in some instances, as with Caridad, the narrator rewrites these stereotypes in order to empower rather than typecast. By resisting drives for linearity, empiricism, and finality, So Far from God enacts a specifically Latina feminist mode of narration. Both novels, by unsettling norms about narration and authority, enable readers to question and reimagine all kinds of institutions—especially the family.

The final chapter, “Cherrie Moraga and Queer Kinship,” takes as its topic the work of Chicana poet, essayist, and playwright Cherrie Moraga, who has been writing about Chicana lesbianism and feminism since the 1980s. In this chapter, I challenge the idea espoused by many Moraga scholars and Moraga herself that her work represents a linear progression or “return” to ancestral practices and concerns. Instead, by examining the occurrence and deployment of the concepts of familia/family, blood, and tribe, and by attending to the publication history of Loving in the War Years, I contend that Moraga’s work actually shows a writer engaged in conscious and on-going self-fashioning. Rather than a line, then, I characterize her work as akin to the patterns made by a spirograph, the children’s tracing toy that creates intricate and interrelated patterns that nonetheless double back on themselves and sometimes end in a different place than they started.
Engaging most deeply with the collections of poems and essays *Loving, The Last Generation*, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, the memoir *Waiting in the Wings*, and the plays *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* and *Giving Up The Ghost*, this chapter surveys Moraga’s *oeuvre* and concludes that part of her project as a writer involves periodically “burning down” previous views on the family, tribe, and blood in order to start anew, as The People do at the end of her play, *Heroes and Saints*. The metaphor of burning perfectly illuminates the kind of violent radicalism that Moraga espouses; it is not violent in the sense that it does harm to others, but violent in the sense that it accepts no half-measures. The focus of her critical energies has changed over the years for Moraga and will probably continue to change. This point, I argue, is lost if Moraga is simply made into an exemplar of Chicana lesbian thought, as though she were static or as though any of her writings serve equally well as a representative of that group.

In the end, this dissertation is only a stepping stone in a larger project that I hope other scholars will take up, as well: mapping out the uses, contradictions, possibilities, and limits of the family in Latino/a literature. Much work remains to be done, both in the many late-20th and 21st century Latina/o texts that continue to be produced as well as in the archive of Latina/o newspapers, novels, poetry, political tracts, and plays of the 19th and early 20th century. Several questions drive this project and can serve as templates for further critical inquiry: Who is included in *la familia*? What are the stakes of revising or redefining these categories? As the pan-ethnic category “Latino/a” will be increasingly deployed not only by government institutions and media, but by Latinas/os themselves, how does the relationship between national imaginary and group identification change?
What cultural and discursive work does the family/la familia do in the context of Latino/a literature? In the pages that follow, I use a variety of methods to answer these questions.
CHAPTER ONE
QUEER FAILURE, SOCIAL LEGIBILITY, AND THE LOGIC OF THE STREET:
PIRI THOMAS’ *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS*

When the streets is watching, blocks keep clocking,
Waiting for you to break, make your first mistake.
--Jay Z, “Streets Keep Watching”

These streets will make you feel brand new…
--Jay Z,” Empire State of Mind”

*The Logic of “The Street”*

“The street” is a conceptual confluence of contradictory meanings: it judges failure but also provides a source of renewal. If we can say there is an opposite to “the street,” a flip-side, it is “the home,” with all its valences of comfort and domesticity. Thus, being on “the streets” implies homelessness and abjection, but also wildness, resourcefulness, and a lack of domesticity. The logic of the street entails a certain resistance to heteronormative family structures. This resistance may be intentional or not, may be a choice or not, but it is there. In the binary pair of street/home, like other powerful binary pairs our culture relies upon, one element is associated with what is right, good, normal, and healthy, while the other signifies that which is wrong, bad, strange, and sick. Yet it is also true that, like so many other binaries, the street/home binary does not fully describe the discursive work that “the street” does. The streets may be the conceptual opposite of the home, but that is not to say that there are not positive associations with the street. The street is the site of meaningful action, both exciting and
brutal, both known and unknown. To know the streets is to possess a valuable kind of knowledge, one that no amount of studying can bring to the bourgeois subject. As a liminal space that is both home and not-home, comforting and dangerous, “these mean streets” enable all kinds of transgressive behavior not possible in polite society and forge bonds between unlikely allies.

Besides the hypermasculine and homosocial world of gangs, one of the most obvious ways that this transgressive behavior happens is in the deployment of the concept of “family.” The world of drag queens, balls, and “houses” is one of the most salient examples of the ways that marginalized communities have recuperated the notion of “family” as a powerful mode of solidarity and community, often after experiencing trauma and rejection in their families of origin. In New York City at least since the 1960s, communities of drag queens, gay men, and other queer folks have been practicing queer community building around the concept of family structures and “houses.” Michael Cunningham explains in “The Slap of Love,” his article about Angie Xtravaganza and the “ball world” of which she was a part, that membership requirements for the different houses varied,¹ but each house had a mother, and children of the houses took on the surname of the house they belonged to, repurposing the patronymic conventions and heteronormative organization of nuclear families to serve different purposes. In Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*, house mother Pepper Labeija explains that the houses use the terms “mother” and “children” not in the “biological heterosexual sense,” but in the sense of a group of people who come together and support one another, guided by the house mother. Nor does this terminology function merely as a

¹ For example, the House of Xtravaganza included, at one point, a heterosexual female aspiring model (Cunningham 186).
metaphor, a gesture: when Venus Xtravaganza is murdered, Angie Xtravaganza, the house mother, is the one to claim the body and to mourn her loss, not Venus’ family of origin.

It is the logic of the street, then—a logic that responds to poverty, lack of opportunity, racism, sexism, and classism—that bind people as diverse as Piri Thomas and Angie Xtravaganza (not to mention Jay Z) together. This logic operates not so much to break down nuclear families, as sociologists of the 1960s, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, thought, as it does to shore up the chosen families of people who do, in fact, understand what their family members are going through. This logic is queer, too, in the sense that it fails, as Judith Halberstam\(^2\) elaborates in *The Queer Art of Failure*; the denizens of the street, the practitioners of this logic, do not achieve middle class respectability, financial independence, home ownership, stable marriages. They do not resolve their lives on linear schedules that value achievement and reproduction in the same way that conventional lives do.

I begin this chapter with a meditation on the streets and street culture in order to launch into my discussion of *Down These Mean Streets*. The novel/memoir details Piri Thomas’s life as an urban, poor, Puerto Rican boy coming of age on the eponymous mean streets of Spanish Harlem and its environs. Told in a realist style of loosely chronological chapters, excerpts of this “fictionalized autobiography” (Di Iorio) appear in at least three major Latino literature anthologies,\(^3\) and the publication of a Vintage

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\(^2\) This author now publishes as “J. Jack Halberstam.”

thirtieth-anniversary edition testifies to the enduring popularity of the book itself. Many Latino/a writers (including Junot Díaz) credit Thomas’ work with giving them permission and space to write their own stories (Morales). Though he is not the only Latino/a author who may have paved the way, thematically and artistically, for later Latino/a writers, the concerns with queerness and social legibility in this memoir usefully frame the succeeding chapters of this dissertation and provide me with an opportunity to demonstrate the ways that an analysis of (queer) family can complicate even an established and widely-cited classic.

Set up loosely as a bildungsroman, toggling between locations, the memoir details the early life of the author as he navigates Harlem, New Jersey, prison, and the American South while trying to come to terms with his ethnic and racial identity in the 1950s and ‘60s United States. The Prologue sets up what will become one of the central concerns of the book—Piri’s gradual alienation from his biological family and his ostensible adherence to a “me-first,” anti-communal ethos:

\[ \begin{align*}
  &\text{Get angry, get hating angry, and you won’t get scared} \\
  &\text{What have you got now? Nothing} \\
  &\text{What will you ever have? Nothing} \\
  &...Unless you cop for yourself! (x)
\end{align*} \]

The hatred, the anger, and the lack of resources are all the catalysts that drive Piri out of the familial home and into the streets. But in the streets, he cannot help recreating some form of family for himself. Though Piri supposedly “cops for [him]self,” he also creates around himself the comfort of his family of “boys.” Lyn Di Iorio Sandín notes in Killing Spanish that “the street” in Thomas’ memoir “replaces originary family even as it takes elements from it (paternalism, for example)” (105). Like Piri, the boys understand the use
value of violence and the impassive, *cara palo* (stone face; lit. “stick face”) that does not betray any emotions. Both the harsh economic reality of the street as well as the harsh racial reality of American society clashing with Puerto Rican racial mores lead Piri to create and nurture throughout the narrative a robust “support network” of men and boys that “sustains him emotionally and validates his identity,” as Marta S. Rivera Monclova says (86).

*Down These Mean Streets* has been hailed as a foundational text in Latino literature for its portrayal of post-World War II Puerto Rican life in Spanish Harlem, as well as for its interrogation of a black/white American racial binary. Many critics, in fact, focus on Thomas’ shifting racial awareness as he comes to understand himself not as Puerto Rican in opposition to black, but as a black Puerto Rican (Caminero-Santangelo, Martínez-San Miguel, Marta Sánchez, Sosa-Velasco). This is indeed an important aspect of the book. However, my focus here will be more on the way Piri conforms (or not) to normative social structures, especially relating to gender and sexuality, in the context of “the streets.” In *Down These Mean Streets*, the nuclear family’s participation in the capitalist society around them, on top of the racism and xenophobia they already face, results in Piri’s father working long hours doing the worst kind of work in order to support his family, a scenario that will end up shaping Piri’s worldview profoundly. In an early scene, Piri imagines his father feeling “trapped” by his love for his children (Thomas 11). In fact, he is trapped; unless he is willing to abandon his family, he must continue to work in order to provide them with the meager living they have.

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4 I follow what appears to be standard practice in speaking critically about this novel by referring to “Piri” as the subject of the narrative and “Thomas” as the author of the book in order to distinguish them from each other. However, the book’s status as memoir sometimes necessitates a conflation of the two.
Thus, from the very beginnings of the novel, Thomas associates freedom with a lack of familial commitments. This is an association that the novel will reinforce but also undermine time and again in various situations; Piri resists many normative strictures (represented most clearly by his girlfriend, Trina), but his surrogate family of “boys” clearly stands in for his family of origin in several important respects. The particular cultural moment in which Thomas is writing, too, was renewing its interest in the family with vigor, as I explain in more detail below. “The Moynihan Report” and anthropological work by Oscar Lewis, among others, were focusing on the ways that minority communities did not conform to middle-class, Anglo norms of behavior and social organization, hazarding theories about how and why poverty continued to plague certain populations and not others. In *Down These Mean Streets*, Thomas responds to these discourses and shows Piri exploring various modes of resistance to heterosexual, capitalist, patriarchal norms, engaging in a kind of queer mode of resistance to the soul-crushing poverty and racism around him. Ultimately, however, Piri rejects the queer modes of being that street life, the merchant marines, and drug use offer him in order, ostensibly, to focus on rescuing other men like him. Yet part of what he rescues them from is not only drug addiction but the liminal space of street life. Piri’s eventual rejection of the street is a narrative strategy that renders the text comprehensible to a wider/whiter readership.

*Family Values In Post-WWII America*

Most Americans have a very specific image of what the stereotypical mid-twentieth-century American family looks like: white and middle class, with a wife who stays home, a husband who works, several children, a house in the suburbs. In other
words, something very like Ward, June, Wally, and the Beav. Conservative pundits even today hearken back to the middle of the twentieth century as a golden era of prosperity and social harmony, when it was possible to support a family on a single income and hard work led to success—and not coincidentally, before women and minority men were fully enfranchised in this country (Coontz). Yet “the family” during this time was also under intense scrutiny. (That the family is under scrutiny should come as no surprise; it has been so at least since Freud located the nexus of our neuroses there.) Perhaps the presence of such comforting and docile TV families as the Cleavers should make it unsurprising that, below the calm surface of apparent social harmony, the waters were reaching a boiling point that would soon overflow into multiple, sometimes intersecting, movements: notably for African American civil rights and Black Power, women’s liberation, and, slightly later, El Movimiento and the Young Lords, among others. These

5 Finding contemporary examples of this attitude about the past is like shooting fish in a barrel: In an Op-Ed in the New York Times published May 1st, 2015, David Brooks held forth about what he perceives as the root causes of the “urban riots” that seem to be happening “every few months” now: “[T]he real barriers to mobility are…the quality of relationships in a home and a neighborhood that either encourage or discourage responsibility, future-oriented thinking, and practical ambition” (Brooks). Brooks is speaking of policy here, not the immediate causes of the “riots,” which have unfailingly been the use of excessive force by police against unarmed Black men. Still, he does not mention police brutality, or even police or law enforcement, once in an article that purports to reveal the “real” reason Black people are disproportionately poor and incarcerated in this country. Apparently, for Brooks, the poor exist in a social vacuum, affected only by their own self-perpetuating values. Unfortunately, views like Brooks’ are all too common. Thomas’ memoir remains interesting precisely because the assumptions that structured his social life continue to structure the lives of so many today, and his responses to them remain compelling.

6 Chicano and Nuyorican nationalisms often presented their liberatory plans “in terms that privilege heteronormative and patriarchal paradigms, especially the traditional family structure,” as Jennifer Domino Rudolph says (69). The two movements, however, grew out of the distinct experiences of the Mexican-American (Chicano) and Puerto Rican (Young Lords/Nuyorican) experiences. Both movements also nurtured astonishing artistic production and tended to emphasize opposition to Anglo-American norms.
movements, particularly the civil rights and women’s rights movements, often resulted in tangible legislative gains for the groups involved, but also initiated a period of “unrest” that, along with the Viet Nam War, forced Americans to reevaluate what it meant to be “American.”

Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 document, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (the so-called “Moynihan Report”), famously characterizes poor black American families as dominated by women, plagued by under- and unemployment, and lacking in father figures. Around the same time, anthropologist Oscar Lewis was writing books on Mexican and Puerto Rican “cultures of poverty.” It is easy to see how positions such as Lewis’s and Moynihan’s could be (in fact, were) used as evidence that poverty, like other cultural markers, is passed down from parents to children and therefore that the “breakdown” of nuclear families in minority communities has a (causal) relationship to poverty. However, closely reading these foundational works reveals more nuance than they are typically credited with.

Though modern readers would cringe at certain phrasings and assumptions in Moynihan’s report, it would be difficult to walk away from reading it with the sense that Moynihan blamed “Negroes” for their own disadvantaged status, or that he would ever advocate for cutting government-sponsored social safety nets, as social and fiscal conservatives of today often recommend. Rather, it is the breakdown of the nuclear family due to a number of historical and social causes—and the necessity of a nuclear family for economic stability—that Moynihan pinpoints. In a short piece that prefaces the

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7 Moynihan and Lewis were contemporaries in every sense; Moynihan included Lewis’s essay “The Culture of Poverty” in a 1969 anthology he edited called On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences.
report proper, Moynihan asserts that white racism and the effects of slavery and Jim Crow are part of the reason that “Negroes” have not achieved economic parity with white Americans in spite of apparent civil rights gains. Only after stating these underlying causes does Moynihan say that, contrary to popular belief, the “gap” between “Negroes and other groups” is widening, not closing, and identifies “the establishment of a stable Negro family structure” as the focus the government should take in dealing with this issue (ii, para 8 & 9). Thus, though he may not have realized it, what Moynihan actually describes concisely in this opening part of the report is the deep linkages between heteronormative, nuclear family and capitalism. In spite of his somewhat nuanced articulation of causes, however, it is difficult not to see how academics, politicians, and the rest of society were only too ready to interpret Moynihan’s report as making Black urban poor people responsible for their experiences of racist and classist systems of employment, housing, and education. (Women, too, were frequently blamed for their own [and their children’s] problems, in popular media as well as in scholarship and academia, especially psychology, as Betty Friedan pointed out in The Feminine Mystique.)

Moynihan’s report, whatever its intentions or merits, enabled conversation about the urban poor (especially the “nonwhite”) to achieve a gloss of verifiable facts based on observations.

According to Marta S. Rivera Monclova in her recent dissertation, Discrimination, Evasion, and Livability in Four New York Puerto Rican Narratives, Oscar Lewis’ concept of a “culture of poverty,” unlike Moynihan’s focus on structure, pathologizes the Puerto Rican poor in a “circular” argument that makes them responsible

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8 The study seems to equate the terms “Negro” and “nonwhite” in various places—an unsurprising conflation given the racial binarism of the United States, especially then.
for their poverty. Rivera Monclova focuses on La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York for her critique, pointing out that many of the “cultural” values Puerto Ricans supposedly have, according to Lewis, deviate from Anglo American norms pertaining to sex, gender, and sexuality: women are unwed, children are illegitimate, men are not primary breadwinners, etc. (Rivera Monclova 64). She goes on to cite Edwin Eames and Judith Goode (contemporaries of Lewis) who pointed out that these characteristics are precisely the kind of “adaptive” traits that people living in sustained poverty might adopt; for example, the costs of both the formal marriage ceremony as well as a potential legal dissolution are prohibitive to those living in poverty, so refraining from entering this institution can be seen as adaptive, rather than a characteristic of culture. Rivera Monclova claims that the “culture of poverty” idea was “sharply critiqued” at the time, and discredited shortly after its publication (63-64). La Vida was certainly critiqued and reviewed extensively, in two separate publications of Current Anthropology, but the impression that Rivera Monclova gives is of a dismissal of Lewis as a quack; this is not at all the case. In fact, Eames and Goode think that the

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9 9.5 (1968) and 11.4/5 (1970). Opler (1968) thinks that the Lewis’ sample sizes are too small (admittedly, part of his innovation involved focusing on a single family in depth rather than a large cross-section of a neighborhood more shallowly). St Erlich (1968) notes that the term “culture of poverty” ignores many other forces at work in people’s lives that can contribute to their behavior (and lists Yugoslav peasants who are very good to each other as a counterexample). In addition, considerable space in Current Anthropology 10.2/3 is given to a collection of reviews of Poverty and Culture, Charles A. Valentine’s book-length, direct response to and critique of Lewis; Margaret Mead comes to Lewis’ defense in her short review of Poverty and Culture, as do some others. No doubt there are things in La Vida that are, in fact, racist; but it would be next to impossible to find work from the 1960s treating race, class, and/or sex or gender that we do not find unsavory according to present-day mores. In most of the reviews and in Lewis’s own response to Valentine’s book, it seems that the problem here is not so much Lewis’ methods (though, in true academic fashion, these also come under scrutiny) as it is his pitching of relatively complex ideas to a wide popular audience, leading to simplifications and conflations (like “culture” and “subculture”) that do, indeed, support the idea that those who live in poverty are themselves responsible for that state. But that idea predates Lewis, and, like any prejudice, finds the justification is needs to survive, no matter what quarter that justification comes from.
concept of a culture of poverty is a good one, though they also think that Lewis’s focus on the nuclear family is too narrow. La Vida, like the Moynihan report, was participating in a larger cultural discourse about family and its abnormalities as expressed in (non-Anglo, non-middle class) substrata of society; the underlying assumption in both studies is that avoiding poverty in capitalist, patriarchal societies requires strongly heteronormative nuclear families. These ideas permeated all levels of society; it seems to me to give too much power to academic anthropologists to say that the ideas emanate from the Ivory Tower into society instead of vice-versa or both ways. Nonetheless, that minority families were seen as pathological can scarcely be doubted; the force with which cultural nationalism movements asserted the normativity of the (Chicano, Nuyorican, and Black) family testifies to the long reach of the idea of pathology.

This mid-twentieth century context is important to keep in mind in reading Thomas’ memoir/novel. Piri seems to confirm certain stereotypes about urban Latino males (or, to put it less anachronistically, Puerto Rican males): that they are womanizers, drug-users, unemployed, involved in crime; in other words, he seems to conform perfectly to the pathologizing discourse of “poor Puerto Rican male.” Yet the arc of the plot also suggests that he wishes to subvert these stereotypes through a narrative of redemption: he goes to jail, where he educates himself, finds Allah (briefly) as well as a white, Christian God, and learns to respect himself and “play the game”; his cara palo mask turns into the “soft and relaxed” face of a parolee (still, of course, a mask, but one
that allows him to stay out of prison).\textsuperscript{10} In spite of what can be read as a redemption arc, however, Piri continues to resist normative family life for the entire length of the book.\textsuperscript{11}

Lewis is important to Rivera Monclova’s argument because she claims that his “ideas have gained and maintained a hold on political thought to this day,” citing conservative radio pundit Bill Cunningham (who, I would be willing to bet, has not cracked \textit{La Vida}) as an example (63-64). To my mind, however, this is not necessarily evidence that Lewis was the originator of ideas about Puerto Ricans that took a firm hold in the cultural imaginary of the United States, as Rivera Monclova comes close to arguing. Instead, it seems to me that Lewis tapped in to something that was already in the cultural imaginary of white and Anglo America in the 1960s: first, that Puerto Ricans were “different” from white Anglo Americans, and second, that poverty, like language, food, dance, dress, ways of holding the body and occupying public space, is culturally “passed on” from one generation to another. To “biologize poverty,” as Rivera Monclova says, is obviously to center pathology in the family, the nexus of racial, class, and gender identities and the site of cultural and genetic inheritance.

Piri’s life demonstrates a resistance to social normativity, including resisting starting a heterosexual, reproductive family; the narrative makes clear, over and over, that what has made Piri’s life livable is his tight-knit network of “boys,” not the normalizing powers of wife, children, and steady work. However, Thomas emphasizes that many of

\textsuperscript{10} This “redemption” narrative is in contrast to other U.S. Puerto Rican “streets” writers, like Miguel Piñero, whose “A Lower East Side Poem” exhorts the reader to “scatter my ashes thru / the Lower East Side,” identifying the streets full of crime and drug-use as the proper home for him: “I don’t wanna be buried in Puerto Rico / I don’t wanna rest in long island cemetery […]”

\textsuperscript{11} Di Iorio points out that in his life outside the confines of \textit{Down These Mean Streets}, Piri married a white, rich woman eventually—Suzie Dod Thomas (113).
these things—(white) wife, house, job—are out of reach for Piri even were he to pursue them, because achieving any measure of “success” in this context requires navigation of a racist and xenophobic system. However, though Piri is quite incisive in his analysis of American racial dynamics, he leaves gender constructions and mores largely unexamined. Rivera Monclova hypothesizes that Piri’s failure to examine gender and sexuality as closely as he examines race is a result, in part, of a desire to avoid the extra stigma associated with openly “gay” identity, since he is “already marginalized with regard to race and poverty” (86). However, I would counter that this unnecessarily lets Thomas off the hook; there is no reason to sidestep Piri’s sexism and homophobia, and no reason to be shocked that such attitudes occur in his writing; after all, much of the Latina feminist writing of the 1980s and early 1990s was responding not only to the racism and sexism of the larger American society, but also to the racism and sexism to be found in white women’s movements and cultural nationalist movements, respectively.¹² Piri is not only responding to an Anglo culture that pathologizes poor, Puerto Rican families like his that do not measure up; he is also operating out of a particular cultural context that, like Anglo American culture,¹³ places the responsibility for purity on women and denies their agency to move freely through social situations the way almost all men feel free to do.

¹² The Puerto Rican nationalist movement The Young Lords actually incorporated anti-sexism into their “13 Point Program and Platform,” adopted in October 1969, at the insistence of some of the women in the group: “[Point] 10. We Want Equality For Women. Machismo Must Be Revolutionary…Not Oppressive” (Beautone, ellipsis in original). In contrast, during the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference, held in Denver in March 1969, in which “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” was adopted, a conference workshop about women in El Movimiento explicitly declared that “It was the consensus of the group that the Chicana woman does not want to be liberated.” Of course, this stance was immediately challenged by Chicanas who, in fact, did want to be liberated, from sexism as well as racism; see Chicana Feminisms; This Bridge Called My Back.

¹³ Both cultures’ sexism derives primarily from their European roots.
Thomas by no means presents Piri as an unflawed hero, nor is it necessary to force him into the mold of a modern-day progressive stance in order to find value in his work. Instead of deifying or condemning him, it is much more interesting to look at the places where Piri’s actions are neither black nor white, good nor bad, but take place in some liminal, queer space in between.

Queer Responses to Conservative “Family Values”

Perhaps because the family has been a focus of conservative movements that often aim to limit alternative expressions of sexuality and kinship, and because it (along with its related concept, children) remains the primary, unchallenged organizing structure and raison d’être of civil society, it is perhaps unsurprising that several prominent queer theorists have touched on family’s queer potential in their work. Lee Edelman’s *No Future* outlines a queer mode of being that rejects “heterofuturity” focusing on children, reproduction, productivity, and hopeful, future-oriented politics. Judith Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* is a model of thinking about the ways that “queerness” applies not only to sexual practices and mores, but to ways of occupying space and conceptualizing time. Halberstam’s insight that it is not sexual practice necessarily that is threatening to heteronormativity, but a lifestyle that defers or ignores the normative timeline of “birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2), is relevant to all manner of readings of “subcultures.” “Queer time…[is] about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” Halberstam claims here (2). In another work, *The Queer Art of Failure* (mentioned briefly above), Halberstam endeavors to explore the archive of the silly, the stupid, and the lost in order to uncover the potentiality of failure.
Building on the work of Halberstam, as well as Edelman and others, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz follows Ernst Bloch in drawing a distinction between “abstract utopia” and “concrete utopia.” This distinction is an important one, Muñoz maintains, because abstract utopias are not rooted in a “historically situated struggle,” as concrete utopias are, and therefore they “falter,” offering only a “bland optimism” instead of the “critical and potentially transformative political imagination” that a concrete utopia can provide (3). All of this talk of the future and the importance of hope is a response to the antirelational queer thesis made popular by *No Future*. Muñoz is careful to point out that, while Edelman’s work “energizes” his own in certain ways, the antirelational thesis seems to operate in practice as a way to “distance” sexuality from other categories of difference like race, sex, and gender (11). Instead of dismissing hope and futurity, and giving in to “the devastating logic of the here and now…a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity,” Muñoz instead advocates for a vision of queerness that figures it as “always on the horizon” (12, 11). As he claims, “[w]e must vacate the here and now for a then and there” (185).

I hesitate to assign a one-to-one correspondence between the theories of queer academics working in the 21st century and those of Piri Thomas, writing about his experiences of poverty and racism, in the mid-20th century. But these ideas—of queer time and space, of the uses and opportunities failure presents, of the utopic potential of queerness—can be fruitfully applied to Piri’s situation. Piri’s actions suggest that he inhabits a queer space and time (whether voluntary or not), that he is not interested in the trappings of normative success. Rivera Monclova maintains that Piri’s lifestyle and
choices enact a certain queer resistance to racist, heteronormative systems (39). However, as my parenthetical aside above about Piri’s agency suggests, there is some difference between wanting heteronormativity, but not having access to it (a position Piri espouses at certain points) and refusing heteronormativity in favor of one’s own queer drumbeat. Are they both queer desires? Perhaps. Do they both emanate from queer people? This answer depends on whether one limits “queerness” to sexuality or not.14 The redemptive narrative arc of *Down These Mean Streets* can be read as a normalizing gesture that recuperates the queer (delinquent) Piri as a proper subject for middle-class, white readers. Still, if “disappointment is a big part of utopian longing,” as Muñoz says, then Piri can certainly be read in the tradition of queers who hope for things not yet achieved (188).

Muñoz’s insights, too, are absolutely crucial for any critic associating Piri Thomas with queerness, because they do not stop at the “here and now” as proper channels for queer, supposedly non-reproductive energy. Piri is a complicated figure, and certainly no poster child for the LGBTQIA community. Yet several things complicate Piri’s stated identification with heterosexual masculinity: that, though he professes a wish to engage in heteronormative reproductive marriage, he does not do so; that he witnesses and participates in non-normative sexual activities; and that, like the queens and queers living in Houses and participating in balls, he exists in a queer space: the mean streets.

**Piri and Masculinity**

One of the main arcs of the novel is Piri’s struggle to “become hombre.”

Normative modes of masculinity—marriage, a stable job, supporting children and owning

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14 I would argue, following Muñoz, that while sexuality is never not present in the connotation of “queer,” protecting queerness as “only” about sexuality, divorced from race and class, shuts down queer’s transformative potential.
property—are continually denied him in the classist, racist and xenophobic worlds he exists in. Becoming *hombre* on the streets, however, follows the alternative logic of having *corazón*, or heart—a quality that is only valuable within the community of boys on the street. Though Piri regards homosexuality (which the novel associates consistently with feminized behavior) with horror and disgust, both on the streets and in jail, the homosociality of Piri’s gang, under whose influence girls are merely markers of status, often slides into the homoerotic. Whereas Piri repeatedly resists female love, he frames his resistance to eroticism between men not as too disgusting to even contemplate, but too powerful to control. In the queer space of the streets, becoming *hombre* can and does include non-normative gender experiences.

In the apartment of three transwomen,15 Piri has a shadowy, strange sexual experience that he has difficulty explaining. It is both pleasurable and terrifying, both desired and not. To briefly summarize: the boys, about thirteen at this point, are hanging out, when “the talk turned way out, on faggots and their asses which, swinging from side to side, could make a girl look ridiculous, like she wasn’t moving. There were some improbable stories of exploits with faggots” (54-55). Alfredo, a slightly older boy, proposes that they “cop” some money from some “faggots” he knows (55). Alfredo leads the boys to an apartment, and Piri details the disgust and nervousness the boys feel, along with their unwillingness to back away from a proposed plan, lest they be seen as not “down” or as lacking “heart.”

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15 I will anachronistically refer to the three people as “transwomen” or by their names when I do not use Thomas’ language. Though the personages Piri refers to as “faggots” and “maricones” would probably not have understood themselves as “trans” at this moment in time, it also seems inaccurate to me to describe them as simply “gay” (not to mention an anachronism in its own right, since shades of meaning for such terms have shifted significantly since the late ‘40s/early ‘50s).
When the boys arrive at the apartment, they meet three transwomen: Antonia, La Vieja (“about thirty or forty”) and Concha. They all start drinking and smoking pot. Piri tries to delineate the lines between “real” and “fake” from the moment he enters the apartment, remarking that if his eyes were closed, he “would have sworn these were real broads talking” (58). Shortly thereafter, he smokes a “king-sized” joint down to a “little bit of a roach,” and fantasizes a rumble between his crew and the Jolly Rogers in which his crew is victorious (58-60). At this point in the narrative, the language shifts away from the boys’ nervousness and the transwomen’s alterity and begins to mimic the weird logic of dreams; we are meant, presumably, to attribute this shift in language to the effect of the pot, and ostensibly what is being described is a cannabis high. This dream state persists until he is snapped out of it by “the odor of shit”—the real—and Alfredo beating La Vieja (“blap, blap, blap”) for defecating on him, presumably as a result of their sexual activity (61; Piri has already established that he views this association between feces and anal sex as the natural/only outcome of sex between men). Piri escapes, alone, on to the roof and then to the street. He relates feeling “good and bad” “strong and drained,” concluding that even though he hadn’t liked “the scene,” a guy’s “gotta live…from the bottom of his heart” (62).

Concha, La Vieja, and Antonia cross gender and sexuality binaries in many ways. Lacking more nuanced language to describe who these people are, Piri and his friends dismiss them as “faggots” and “maricones,” but it is clear that they are living as women, at least inside of this apartment and in this moment, not necessarily as “gay” men. Antonia performs feminine cattiness when she retorts to Concha’s claim of rape that Concha shouldn’t pretend she didn’t like it (61). Concha explains that her rape by four
“boys” was not enjoyable because, as she explains, she “haf [her] period an’ eet ees all right for some womans to make love like that, but I no one of them. For me eet ees not comfortable” (58). Concha clearly considers herself a “real broad,” performing this identity so thoroughly that her menstrual cycle interrupts her sex life. This detail is probably meant to emphasize the absurdity of the “faggots’’ gender/sex expression, yet it also emphasizes that they are “real” women in every sense that matters to Piri and his friends. They chatter in feminized voices, they have “girl smiles,” they can swing their rear ends enough to “make a girl look ridiculous,” they are sources of “bread” for their boyfriends/partners, and they have a nice “pad,” signaling their domesticity.

This scene is remarkable for associating Piri’s first sexual experiences with queer and shadowy iterations of womanhood and manhood. During his high fantasy/hallucination, the rumble Piri imagines (like the real fight that immediately precedes this scene in the chapter) is full of homosocial and homoerotic touching: “You feel somebody put his damn fist square in your damn mouth and split your damn lip and you taste your own sweet blood—and all of a sudden you’re really glad you came” (60).16 When he comes to from his masculine fantasy of a rumble with the Jolly Rogers and orgasmic description of being high, Piri registers being touched “where only me or a girl should touch”—Concha is massaging his penis and unzipping his pants (60). Piri reports trying to resist this by trying to “make me…move” but also reports that even if he himself does not dig the scene, his “pee-pee” does (61). The previous confusion between Concha—who smiles a “girl’s smile” (57)—and “real broads,” as well as the phrasing “where only me or a girl should touch,” gives pause. This split between “me,” the “pee-

16 Here as elsewhere unless otherwise noted, the emphasis is in the original.
pee,” and the conscious self is notable in that it compartmentalizes and distances Piri enough from this encounter that he does not have to acknowledge any feelings about it other than disgust. He has also introduced enough doubt about Concha’s “realness”—as woman and man—that it is impossible to read this as a “gay” scene. That is, Concha (to Piri) is neither “really” a man “pretending” to be a woman or “really” a woman; she is simply outside the binary reality of sex and gender, just as Piri’s fantasy is outside his reality.

Piri does not use any words that connote pleasure to describe his feelings after Concha fellates him and he ejaculates, but only “funny,” “weak,” and “lazy,” reporting that he felt “like [he] wanted to yell” before he came (61). Like Concha’s sex and gender, Piri’s feelings are not contained in binary pairs: good/bad, strong/weak, but encompass both and go beyond both. Piri’s “funny” feelings, presumably, are funny because they depart from the rubric of disgust that has been his model for understanding what is happening in the apartment up to that point. Piri’s solo escape to the roof—away from both his boys and the “faggots”—enables him to reflect on what has just happened to him. What he draws from the experience in the apartment does not seem to be a conviction that he is “straight,” but that whatever life throws at him, living with heart—that is, according to the logic of the street—is the most important thing.

This scene emphasizes that the logic of the street enables all kinds of border transgressions not possible anywhere else (like Babylon, Long Island, where Piri’s family moves when he is in high school). Though Piri’s masculinity rests on his disavowal of homosexuality/passivity, and his avowal of heterosexuality/active roles (“I like broads, I like muchachas, I like girls” he chants as Concha fellates him), this scene also resists easy
classification as “straight”; Piri does not report this as a completely negative experience—the “pee-pee” likes what is happening, and “me” cannot be forced to leave. Further, these gender/sex transgressions seem to trigger in Piri reflections on both the culture of the street and the homosociality that bonds him to his “boys,” as well as the inequality that enables millionaires’ mansions to line Central Park, while less than a mile north, the Barrio is full of crumbling buildings. The build-up to the scene in the apartment is also characterized by talk of economics; “cop[ping] some bread” is the sole reason given for going to the apartment in the first place, though wine, pot, and sex of various kinds are what they actually receive, not cash. Because Piri and his friends are outside of the traditional structure where a nuclear family provides for all their needs and/or where they are able to easily secure employment, all kinds of transgressions and conflagrations (sex with money, power with violence) become possible.

Critics generally read this scene as an early test of Piri’s manhood from which he emerges successfully. Robert Reid-Pharr reads it as a way for Piri to distance himself from the homosexual while maintaining all the homoeroticism of his relationships (Reid-Pharr 381). “[T]he homosexual stands in for the fear of crisis and chaos,” he writes (381). Reid-Pharr explores the notion of boundaries around Black manhood, particularly as it is embodied in this scene and a later prison scene, and the association of (homo)sex with shit, as a way to re-erect boundaries around Black masculinity. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé claims that this scene with the “faggots” is a way for Piri to forge his masculinity through the example of the “faggots”’ abjection (143). The association of “shit” with the abject makes the transwomen representative of “the state of abjection through which [the macho’s] masculinity is constituted,” he claims (143). “Down These Mean Streets tries to
assume [the state of abjection] and to contain it through a rhetoric of transfiguration,”
namely, of “desire into repudiation” (142, 144). As I note above, Sánchez departs
somewhat from Reid-Pharr and Cruz-Malavé in her interpretation of this scene, asserting
that it is the “transvestites” who are actually the active ones in this encounter because of
their economic power (the supposed “bread” the boys will “cop”) (124). Additionally, she
reads the encounter as “undermining” the boys’ heterosexuality, though she agrees that it
is a “test” that the boys must pass in order to achieve “masculine identity” (123).
(However “copping some bread” seems only to be an excuse to go to the apartment;
clearly, Alfredo, for one, is interested in more than just passively receiving a blow job
from the women and receiving money.)

What these readings have in common is that they all identify the purpose of this
passage as showing a test of inchoate masculinity from which Piri and his friends emerge
fully formed as men. Piri’s “pee-pee,” linguistically infantilized, wants what his mind
knows is wrong. Indeed, that he uses the word “pee-pee” and not “joint” or “peter,”
which have also been used as slang terms for penis, seems to suggest that some innate,
childlike part of Piri actually wants the interaction with Concha—or doesn’t know not to
want it. Yet the ambiguity of this scene, especially in the context of the rest of the
narrative, suggests multiple different possibilities. Is this happening against Piri’s will? If
so, why does the “pee-pee” “dig the scene”? Is this a sort of “gay for pay” scenario,
where the transwomen are “buying” the boys’ services, as Sánchez suggests, or is it more
likely that the boys plan to steal or otherwise coerce money from the women after being
admitted to their apartment socially, as they do with their girlfriends? It seems likely to
me that this encounter, far from being strange and incomprehensible, is left so shadowy
and suggestive precisely because it is the logical conclusion of Piri’s feelings about his boys and his feelings about “broads.” That Piri cannot sort out clearly whether this encounter is pleasurable or repulsive, too, mimics his lack of clarity about masculinity in general. If masculinity consists in having corazón, then this scene is a confirmation of his masculinity. If masculinity consists in being the aggressive “chingón,” to borrow the Mexican phrase, then this instance of fellatio from “faggots” whom Piri perceives as men, some with “bigger joints than the guy that was screwing,” seems to fall outside of that criterion, though it does not violate it (55).

One striking thing about both the narration of this scene and critical articles about it is that they do not identify the “faggots” as transwomen or differentiate between kinds of gayness. However, just as faulting Lewis for failing to use 21st century concepts in his study seems unfair, so too would it be unfair to fault these critics for not being as attuned to trans* issues as we are becoming now. Further, as Susan Stryker says in Transgender History, in the early 20th century, the gay movements and the trans movements were not necessarily distinguished from one another, particularly not by outsiders, though within the communities, various “kinds” of “gayness” have always existed. Other issues, like class and race, also affected who allied with whom. For example, “straight,” mostly white, middle class men who liked to dress in women’s clothing but also liked to sleep with straight, cis-gendered women were a distinct group with distinct needs from poorer, working class, mostly Black and Latino “queens,” who may or may not have identified as

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17 The asterisk after the word “trans” is meant to indicate an inclusive usage that covers not only transsexual and transgender, but transvestite, genderqueer and otherwise gender non-conforming folks. See Sam Killerman, “What Does The Asterisk in Trans Stand For?” at It’s Pronounced Metrosexual (http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/) for a brief explanation of this orthographic marker.
“gay” (see Stryker, “Transgender Liberation,” Chapter 3). Though these groups were allied with each other, it is reductive to think of them as “the same.” (Indeed, with the growth of what might be called “respectability politics” in gay and lesbian rights organizations, where much emphasis has been expended on normalizing gayness, a concomitant movement to recognize the “T” in LGBT has gained momentum. As many queer and feminist theorists have noted, the downside of these respectability politics is the marginalizing of non-normative kinship structures and identities, including trans* lives.) As it does in so many other ways, Down These Mean Streets faithfully represents the popular opinion of the time that to be anything other than straight and cis-gendered is to be perverse and unnatural. Yet in spite of itself, as I suggest above, the scene’s layered feelings and temporalities reveal a childlike self that “digs” the scene, away from boundaries and strictures on gender expression.

In prison, Piri must confront the issue of sexuality all over again. Instead of the drive to go along with the group no matter what, however, now Piri must resist seeking out the comfort of men on “the inside” lest he become so used to it that he continues it on the “outside”—that is, lest the main difference between homosociality (outside jail) and homosexuality (inside jail) be lost. Piri tells readers that if he begins to have sex with men, he knows he won’t be able to stop: “Just one time and...I’ll be screwing faggots as fast as I can get them” (263). He rejects another inmate’s proposal that Piri be his “daddy-o” by saying, “I’ll jack off if I gotta, but I ain’t gonna marry you, faggot, no matter what” (263). This chapter is titled “Sex in the Can,” “can,” of course, being slang for “prison” as well as “toilet.” Once again, Piri associates sexual activity that makes him uncomfortable—that is “boundaryless,” as Reid-Pharr says—with excrement. What’s
more, in prison, Piri must reckon with his own feelings and agency in homosexual situations, instead of passively receiving favors from Concha. To be passive in prison, Piri immediately understands, is to admit defeat.

Even Piri’s vehement rejection of love from men within prison is not necessarily centered on the repulsiveness of that love, but on what the consequences of such choices would be. Claude, the inmate who propositions Piri, finds “another taker” in Big Jules, “a stud,” according to Piri (263). They have a wedding ceremony to formalize (or normalize) their commitment to each other, and Piri realizes, “scared and hard, that this was what [he] had to fight against” (264). Though our contemporary moment might suggest that what Piri realizes he must fight against is gay marriage or the legitimacy of gay relationships, in context, what Piri seems to be fighting against is the notion that life can go on “inside”; after all, Big Jules is not described as a “maricón” but a stud, even though he is marrying another man. Piri’s admission that homosexual sex is not repulsive, but so tempting that it would render him out of control, is followed immediately by the rationalization that he must not become “institutionalized” and “lose [his] hatred of this damn place” (263). What seems obvious to Piri here about male romantic love and serving time is that accepting the one makes the other one easier, and consequently makes being “outside” less desirable. What Piri is resisting here—being institutionalized—is perhaps also why he never marries Trina, why he doesn’t hold down several low-wage jobs like his father did, preferring hustling, and why he refuses to “do right” by Dulcien, the woman he impregnates. He is resisting the institutionalization of prison. Though it is supposedly the thought of Trina that gets Piri through prison, this
passage suggests that it is actually the rejection of institutions—in other words, Piri’s queerness—that does it.

Marta Caminero-Santangelo has written a deft chapter about Down These Mean Streets’ approach to race as it relates to identity in On Latinidad; there she argues that Piri at different points appeals to both social and biological definitions of race, resolving his ambiguities by the last third of the novel by accepting that society’s perception of his blackness is what determines his privileges and treatment. She notes that these seemingly conflicting notions of race “call out to be judged contextually, in terms of the strategic purposes they serve” (67). While scholars like Paul Gilroy worry about the “‘tainted’ discourse of race,” Caminero-Santangelo argues that Thomas shows that the “mean streets,” though possibly “ill-informed” about the discoveries of academics, “are no less a site for subversion, even if such subversion deploys tainted categories” (On Latinidad 67). Indeed, one could even argue that Piri’s views on race, in complicating the black/white binary of the United States and the implicit colorism of Puerto Rican mores, queers both discourses in insisting on his own complex experience.

There is one glaring way, however, in which this novel is not subversive: Piri’s sexism. Sometimes Piri’s sexism is so thick that it almost seems like camp—like Thomas is giving an elaborate and confusing wink to the reader. But if it seems like Piri only sees women as means to an end, that’s because that is exactly how they function in this novel—especially his great love, Trina. Piri emphasizes repeatedly that he does not sleep with Trina because he is “saving” her for marriage. Piri’s veneration of Trina, the white Puerto Rican, as the ideal partner for him supports the idea that part of the project of this book is to establish Piri’s capacity to desire normative family, including by having a
white, “good,” Puerto Rican woman by the hearth. (This project is undercut, however, by the fact that Piri never follows through on that ideal, and that somebody else “gets” Trina in the end; Piri’s “savings” have gone to waste, ostensibly, since he was never able to sleep with Trina in the context of their marriage.)

One of the reasons that he and Trina do not marry immediately, presumably, is because Piri cannot marry her “the right way” without money and “straight” work; but it is also true that Piri does not seem to want, or to make any effort towards, a future with Trina that follows the heteronormative imperatives of marriage and reproduction. When Dulcien says that she is willing to live with him and their child as a wife, but that he does not have to formally marry her, her rejects this offer on the grounds that he has another woman he wants to marry—the angelic (and white) Trina. Instead of ever settling down with Trina, however, Piri rejects the idea that he be a family man and instead places his same-sex peer relationships above all others; when Piri leaves to be a merchant marine/seaman with Brew, he only says goodbye to Trina as an afterthought, since he catches a glimpse of her on the street literally as he and Brew are about to get in a taxi and start their journey; Piri represents her as quite confused by his rushed goodbye, struggling to understand his English (Thomas 165). Clearly, Trina-in-the-flesh is not as important to Piri as the idea of Trina, and what the idea of Trina serves is a vision of Piri that deserves a white woman; with Trina this vision can be reconciled completely with his Puerto Rican identity and his U.S.-inflected racial identity. What Piri does not seem to want, at least not within the covers of this book, is a future with any woman.

Piri’s utter indifference to the plight of women of all colors is staggering. Of pregnant, abandoned Dulcien, who is a cousin of one of his friends, he briefly thinks,
“It’s sure tough to be a broad,” quickly comforting himself with “but that’s life”—not even privately admitting to his part in Dulcien’s “tough” life (226). When Brew tells his story of being attacked in a field by white men intending to sexually abuse him, it takes up two pages; his girlfriend Alayce’s tale of actually being raped by four white men in a field, four lines long, Piri barely registers in order to focus on Brew’s tale of threatened rape (161-163). In the very first chapter, seemingly apropos of nothing except that he is listening to the sounds of the street, Piri reports that he hears, among other “city” sounds, like clattering garbage can lids and sirens, “a broad moaning in pain, ‘Ohhhh, no, please don’t.’ I wondered if it hurt all that much” (4). Not only does he completely dismiss what he clearly recognizes as pain, he also hears a clear withdrawal of consent that goes without comment—in fact, the sounds of the woman’s assailant do not get recorded. No phrase or word is recorded to prompt or respond to the wail. The sound of the “street” is the sound of violence without cause, suffering, assault, and nonconsensual sex. In this context, women—particularly Black women—seem to be the only ones “lower” than dark-skinned men like Piri. In their casual misogyny, however, Piri’s views are quite normative, especially in the way that he sets up a clear virgin/whore dichotomy, where Trina and his mother correspond to the pure Madonna figure and nearly every other woman falls into the latter category. This is one of the ways that Piri’s narrative makes itself legible, and perhaps ironically for modern readers, one of the most jarring aspects of the novel.

Just as Piri struggles to understand himself as somewhere beyond the racial binary of the United States, we can also understand his sexuality as beyond the gay/straight binary, even if he does not have the language to articulate that idea. Piri certainly delays
the futuristic promise of marriage and children to focus on the present, the “here and now” of his boys. This alternative logic of family and kinship Thomas nonetheless cannot quite divorce from the idealized vision of the future that Trina represents. Even after his time in prison, Piri expects to find Trina waiting for him and engages in a wild fantasy in which he is (maybe) fatally stabbed by her husband and corners him in the apartment, beating him senseless (325). What he and Trina do after that, however, is not imagined; that is, there is no fantasy where Trina is a mother to Piri’s children, or recreates the home life Piri had as a child, or even cooks for him, though she is clearly a stand-in for his white mother; she is simply a reason to fight another man, a reason not to give in to the temptation to have sex with other men in prison. In life, Trina is no less a cipher than in Piri’s imagination, saying not a word to him when he visits her cousin’s apartment after leaving prison. It is Trina’s cousin, Ava, and her mother, Trina’s aunt, who give Piri a warm welcome. Trina herself simply “smile[s] something at [him]” before he steps out of the door—even her smile is incomprehensible—while Ava and her mother tell him to come back soon, Ava’s mother twice referring to him as “hijo” (326). It is the women Piri is not interested in romantically, who have known him since he was a kid, who make sure to welcome him back to the neighborhood, but Piri does not comment on them; they fall outside of the virgin/whore dichotomy, and therefore, they do not need to be part of the schematic where women either save or hinder Piri (sometimes both).

Like Trina, Anglo white women function especially symbolically in the memoir and serve as one of the main ways that the novel is rehabilitated into normative 1960s discourse. This is important because, as white women, they embody two valences of identity that Piri finds both attractive and repulsive: whiteness and femaleness. Piri does
not explicitly describe the systematic racism he experiences as linked to his sense of manhood, but the stories he tells about white women make this connection plain. In his first encounter with a white girl, in middle school, he is cruelly rejected. At a school dance in Long Island, the first one Piri attends outside of Harlem, he asks Marcia, the “pretty, well-stacked [white] girl” to dance. She refuses, noting that Piri has an accent “like Jerry’s”—in other words, a Black accent (83). Piri admits that his accent is like other Harlem residents’: “Most of us in Harlem steal from each other’s language or style or stick of living” (84). Subsequent events make clear, however, that Marcia’s real problem is with Piri’s appearance, not his accent; Piri overhears her discussing “the nerve of that black thing” in trying to ask her to dance (85). He runs out of the gym, wounded, and resolves not to stay in Long Island where he is thoroughly rejected as a result of this encounter (87).

A few pages after the incident with Marcia, however, Piri meets a white woman who actually wants to be with him in spite of (or perhaps because of) his skin color, but the reactions of white men on the train make clear to Piri that, once again, his manhood is being denied. Piri and Betty, the woman, are stared at for being together, culminating in racist slurs being hurled at Piri on the train. Piri gets off the train, takes Betty to a field and has sex with her “in anger, in hate,” then rejects her completely (90). Piri reports that “she underst[ands]” why he is angry and tries to comfort him, but he resists her efforts at comfort. Piri dismisses the thought of a relationship with her, an “us,” as “crazy,” though Betty apparently wants to pursue it (90). Like Marcia, Betty represents Piri’s rejection from the entire white world—even those who, like Betty, claim to “understand” what Piri is going through.
Finally, in the culmination of these internalized feelings, Piri does not even need to exchange a word with the white woman to know that he has been, yet again, rejected. In an incident of frottage on the subway, Piri never exchanges a word with the white woman and the rejection happens in his mind. He is pressed against her in a crowded subway car, and they both (supposedly) have orgasms by the time they pull into the next station (136). Piri loses track of her as she walks away into the crowded train station, lamenting that he doesn’t even know her name (137). Washing out his shorts later, Piri imagines her shamefacedly talking about him as a “nigger” and “colored boy” to her friends, who (curiously, since this is Piri’s fantasy) comfort her and let her know that rubbing against a stranger on the train until climax is “just one of those nasty-delightful things one does in rare moments” (141); the imagined conversation this woman has with her friends takes up an entire page. Piri temporarily is able to get his mind out of this damaging self-hating fantasy by imagining the woman on the train saying, “You don’t understand. I was ashamed because I wanted to fight my way back to him” (141). Ostensibly “satisfied” with this ending, Piri nonetheless admits that “inside me, I felt hot and real stink about this funny world…” (141). Of course, the entire fantasy is “inside [him],” undercutting the idea that he is satisfied at all with this ending. And why would he be? This nameless woman, along with Marcia and Betty, essentially confirms to Piri that he will always be kept outside of the full expression of American manhood—that is, fully and legitimately possessing a white woman. Piri’s wooings of white women and their inevitable rejections of him drive him back to the streets, where there is no expectation to marry or be respectable, and where Piri’s authority and masculinity have been long established already.
In spite of his overt obsession with masculinity, then, Piri’s fluid, dreamlike interactions with the transwomen and the white women show the ways in which he has failed to live up to normative standards of (Anglo) masculinity, even as his overt misogyny conforms to these standards. These “negative” experiences with transwomen and white women, then, are also instances of queer failure. Piri’s heterosexuality is queer in the sense that it does not follow a heteronormative futurity; like white gay men’s relationships at the height of the AIDS epidemic, Piri’s primary relationships emphasize the here and now, not the future, and certainly exclude marriage.18

Textual representations of speech serve to highlight Piri’s perceived specialness, setting him apart from Puerto Rican women, from Brew and other African Americans, and from white people. Like the misogyny, these textual accent markers are, in fact, ways that Thomas aligns the book with 1960s notions of normative behavior. Brew and his girlfriend, Alayce, speak with what appear to be Southern, possibly rural, Black vernacular accents. For example, in Chapter 18, “Barroom Sociology,” Brew says to Gerald, a mixed-race man trying to pass as Spanish, “Don’ yuh-all feel a leetle bit more Negro than [one-eighth]?...Tell me, is the book you’re writin’ gonna be frum the Negro’s point o’ view?” (175). In addition, Black women from Piri’s childhood are represented with this same vernacular. Though Piri may sound like other “cats” in Harlem, his speech

18 Speaking of such late-twentieth century gay men as Mark Doty, Thom Gunn, Michael Cunningham, and Lee Edelman, Halberstam points out that out of these apparently foreshortened and death-oriented existences (of living with/dying of AIDS) arose a new way of “making community in relation to risk, disease, infection, and death” (Halberstam 2). Yet Halberstam, citing Cathy Cohen, is quick to note that “the experience of HIV for heterosexual and queer people of color does not necessarily offer the same kind of hopeful reinvention of conventional understandings of time”; when the state considers one’s body “expendable,” as black and brown bodies are, early death is not a space of reformulation of possibilities, but “simply business as usual” (3).
is never represented in this way, textually underlining the difference from Brew that Piri feels, but increasingly realizes that nobody else sees. The other characters who have the most exaggerated “accents,” marked textually, are Piri’s mother (“Are you hon-gree, _hijo_?”) and Antonia, Concha, and La Vieja. Thomas consistently represents Antonia and La Vieja as unable to articulate English properly: “Who ees eet, Antonia?...Eet ees Alfredo” (56). One could also argue that the speech of middle class white folks—or those who speak like middle-class white folks, like Gerald—is also represented as “accented,” or at least marked textually; these characters have many dashes and “er”s inserted into their speech, particularly when they are confronted with the blunt questions or opinions of Piri or Brew—a textual representation of measured, “academic” speech. One way to interpret these textual cues is to see them as the product of a keen ear attempting to represent the diversity of accents and inflections that surround him. Given Piri’s misogyny and his consistently ambivalent feelings about identifying as “Negro” (since in his view, at least at first, being Puerto Rican is different from being Negro), however, it is also possible to see these representations as a way for Thomas to distance Piri from these less desirable identifications. This distance is only necessary if there is some fear that the boundaries between (abjected) women, “Negros,” and men might dissolve, as they have for the “faggots” in Chapter 6. This is part of what Robert Reid-Pharr refers to as an attempt to reinstate some boundaries in Black manhood’s historic “boundarylessness” (373), and part of the rehabilitative project of the novel.

But the paradox here is that Thomas’ own vernacular throughout the book is noticeably “nonstandard” to the point that a glossary in the back is required. (The presence of a glossary, of course implies a reading audience that does not share Piri’s
background.) This glossary does not merely translate Spanish to English, but also "translates" slang words, like "fuzz," meaning police. Phrases like "Mister Charlie," meaning roughly "the man" or "white people," receive no notation in the glossary, and obvious terms, like "muchacha" and "señora," whose meanings are clear from the context, receive translations. (In fact, in the scene in Chapter 6 quoted above, Piri repeats "I like broads, I like muchachas, I like girls" as he receives a blow job from Concha, which would seem to clarify the meaning of that particular word enough for any reader [61].) The ideal (white) reader for whom this glossary is composed has no knowledge of Spanish and no patience to use context clues to figure out meanings, but is apparently well-versed in the various slang terms and nicknames applied to both white and black Americans. Piri marks others’ speech as different from his, but he also sets himself apart from the "paddy" readership. These gestures, I argue, are part of the recuperative

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19 There are also several translations that, while specific to the context of the book, are not clear representations of the meaning of the word, such as "yerba." The glossary defines this word as "tea" (marijuana)" (340). "Yerba" (or "hierba"), however, literally means "herb" or "grass," a common slang term for marijuana in English, as well, while "yerba buena" is a name for a species of mint, often made into tea.

20 Of course, knowing who, exactly, insisted on the Glossary affects what we can say about Thomas’s intentions. It is not a stretch to imagine that the Anglo-dominated New York publishers of Down These Mean Streets (originally Knopf, then Vintage/Random House) would insist that Piri both italicize Spanish words and provide a glossary. Yet it seems to me that the contextual translations probably originate with Thomas, since they are often woven seamlessly into the narrative. For example, in one of the early chapters, Piri relates going to a social services office with his mother. Thomas renders her speech in English, then young Piri translates at her request:

Momma said, “Piri, déle sábanas, frizas, un matre, zapatos para los nene, abrigos y unos pantalones para ti.”

Damn, I thought, don’t beg that maricón, don’t get on your knees no more, Momma. But I said: “My mother says she needs sheets, blankets, a mattress, shoes for the kids, coats, and a pair of pants for me.” (45)

It is Piri himself who does the “begging” here, not his mother, in spite of the fact that the Home Relief Office worker apparently knows Spanish, telling her, “No se apure, señora,” [“Don’t worry, ma’am”] as she leaves—a phrase that receives no translation in the text, but appears in the glossary (45, 340).
project of the novel, reinstating Piri from his queer and liminal existence throughout the novel into a definite person with boundaries, limits, and differences from everyone around him.

Ultimately, the tension between recuperation and queerness in *Down These Mean Streets* is never quite resolved. In the final chapter, just after the chapter where Piri sees Trina for the last time, Piri finds his old friend, Carlito, whom readers met in the first chapters as a little boy. As an adult, Carlito is a heroin addict, and Piri, now clean, watches as his old friend shoots up. As Piri rushes away, unable to take the sight of his friend getting strung out, Carlito yells, “I got dignity, man. I got self-respect…Hey Piri, you making it?” Piri responds, “Yeah,” and reenters the streets, “past hurrying people and an unseen jukebox beating out a sad-assed bolero” (330-31). This final scene is clearly of a piece with the recuperative gestures of the novel; nothing about this street scene is celebratory; there is no emotional rush, no homosocial touching, no corazón, but only a “sad-assed bolero” and an equally sad-assed junkie. Though, as I have outlined above, Piri exists in a queer space (the streets) and a queer time (prolonged “youth” where marriage and children are deferred), the normalizing gestures of Trina and the other white women, the paratextual element of the Glossary, and this ending make *Down These Mean Streets* comprehensible as a heteronormative tale of redemption and manhood.

**Conclusion**

*Down These Mean Streets*’ popularity endures because the particular circumstances of poverty and racialized oppression described within its pages still obtain in the urban centers of America. Thomas is occasionally credited with inspiring or enabling later “streets” literature, and his influence is clear in later Latino/a writers of
“the streets,” including Ernesto Quiñonez, Junot Díaz, and even, I would argue, Sandra Cisneros. However, I am wary of setting him up as the unproblematic “father” of Latino/a literature, not least because the project of this dissertation is to explicitly question all such familial metaphors. Nor is Thomas the only or even the originary writer of “the” Latino/a experience (Américo Paredes, Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, John Rechy, Rolando Hinojosa, Rudolfo “Corky” González, Nicholasa Mohr, Julia de Burgos, and others were also all writing during this time, often dealing with themes of poverty and marginalization, like Thomas). However, the struggle with and resistance to institutionalization and normalization that Thomas depicts in Mean Streets, in spite of its ultimate capitulation to heteronormativity, can usefully function for my purposes as a bridge to the later texts I examine in the following chapters. The fiction of Cristina García, Achy Obejas, Junot Díaz, Ana Castillo, and Cherríe Moraga is also animated by a queer energy that endeavors to express complex subject positions that are not “normal.” Writing three to four decades after Thomas first published Down These Mean Streets, these writers reflect the different times; misogyny can no longer be quite so casual as it is in Mean Streets, and understandings of race (not to mention Puerto Rican and Latino/a identity) have shifted considerably since the late 1960s.

In many ways, Thomas helped prepare the way not for the fetishization of poverty and urban life, but for considering what it means for a people to be part of a nation that does not figure them as part of its narrative of “success,” what it means to be marginal, to resist institutions. It is probably worthwhile to point out here that this is not to imply that “Latino/a literature” can only be about poverty, racism, and lack of nuclear family structures. To the extent than America is still a racist, classist, xenophobic society that
pathologizes difference of all kinds, though, it is fair to say that to be Latino/a—or to be queer, black, female, Native, disabled, or otherwise non-“normative”—is to experience, at some level, a lack of privilege. In giving space and voice to this experience, Piri Thomas showed one way that “a queer time and place” can be engaged, even if partially and even if, ultimately, it must be abandoned in order to make itself legible.
CHAPTER TWO

THE BROKEN FAMILIA CUBANA IN THE FICTION OF

CRISTINA GARCÍA AND ACHY OBEJAS

Family has come to stand for community, for race and for nation. It is a short-cut to solidarity. The discourse of family and the discourse of nation are very closely connected.

--Paul Gilroy, “It’s A Family Affair”

As the above epigraph testifies, family and nation have long been intertwined as metaphors for each other—sometimes even as metonyms. Such an association is so deeply ingrained that it can seem completely natural or even inevitable. While the “human family” is a broad church indeed, potentially bonding all people, the trope of the “national family” creates an insider/outsider binary, where those who are not part of the family do not enjoy or merit the same rights and status as those who are. Indeed, the idea that nations are rooted in some shared origin is precisely what Benedict Anderson was responding to in Imagined Communities when he argued that nations are no longer be composed of those who have face-to-face communal interactions with each other, since no one citizen could ever do that with the entire nation, but instead consist of people who perceive themselves to be part of the same group through language and culture. The parallel premise to the one that nations are like big families is that the strength of the

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1 Donna Haraway’s essay “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936” details the ways that specifically white, Anglo-Saxon, eugenicist American views of family were imposed onto the dioramas of gorillas in the Museum of Natural History, in spite (or ignorance) of what gorilla groups typically look like.
nation is shored up by the existence of strong nuclear family structures, and it too has
been invoked as a self-evident “fact,” a common sense inference that any one may draw.²

Scholars often caution, therefore, that we must be careful in deploying the rhetoric
of family, since it carries so much patriarchal and nationalistic baggage. Thinkers as
diverse (temporally and ideologically) as Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman,
and Shulamith Firestone established time and again the basically patriarchal and
capitalistic nature of marriage and family as they are practiced in the United States (or in
18th-century England, in Wollstonecraft’s case). Speaking specifically about African
diasporic discourses, Paul Gilroy cautions against using family as a unifying political
trope at all, calling it “a short-cut to solidarity” that “has little to offer” since it reinforces
patriarchal frames of mind that figure “the crisis…of black social and political life…as
the crisis of black masculinity” (Gilroy 203, 196, 205).

Drawing on these insights, Patricia Hill Collins, in “It’s All In The Family:
Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation,” argues that family represents a particularly
rich site for intersectional analysis as the nexus of various discourses about nation,
gender, and race. In this essay, Collins explains how nationalism, race, and gender, linked
through the concept of the family, mutually construct one another. Summarizing
definitions of family as heterosexually-oriented, reproductive patriarchal and capitalist
units, she claims that “whether it is family as household, family as foundation for
conceptualizing race, or the national family defined through U.S. citizenship, family
rhetoric that naturalizes hierarchy inside and outside the home obscures the force needed
to maintain those relationships” (67). She closes this essay by calling for an end to

² Ronald Reagan’s focus on “family values” comes to mind, though he was neither the first nor
the last U.S. President to invoke nuclear family harmony as a basic social good.
“criticism” of the family *tout court*, since invoking family still can be a useful way to organize people for progressive ends; rethinking and restructuring the family would be more useful than “endless” critique, she avers (78). Following the logic that nationalism, race, and gender (and, I would add, sexuality) mutually construct one another through the rhetoric of the family, rethinking or restructuring the family must, then, require rethinking or restructuring the nation. Like Collins, I find Gilroy’s disavowal of family rhetoric needlessly limiting: instead of taking for granted that family must be patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalistic, unyoking family from these models of oppression seems more useful than simply accepting that family is spoiled beyond use as a liberatory trope. It is precisely such a restructuring and rethinking that the two works under consideration in this chapter achieve in the context of Cuban-American national identity.

Against the backdrop of nation-as-family and family-sustaining-nation, revolutions must be rendered in the national imaginary as a “breaking” of the family. Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters* and Achy Obejas’ *We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* explore these themes of broken family through the lens of the Cuban revolution and Cuban-American experience, ultimately unsettling patriarchal familial constructs and providing new templates to think through both nation and family. García’s novel is often read as having a generally happy ending, full of possibilities for reconciliation. (Depending on the critic, such perceived hopefulness can be read as a good thing or a bad thing; see my footnote on Ilan Stavans below.) However, I contend that close attention to the novel reveals unresolved plot lines and disturbing disappearances that belie any easy conclusion. Much like Reina Agüero’s skin, pieced together from various multi-colored and -textured grafts after she is struck by lightning,
the resolution the novel finally reaches disquiets rather than soothes. Obejas’ stories, meanwhile, continually refract, refuse, and reframe what family means, and even what queerness and minority status in America mean. The final, title story, featuring a nuclear Cuban exile family whose lesbian daughter refuses her parents’ (particularly her father’s) expectations and narratives about their experience, pulls the collection together as a reflection on the limits of identity categories, including family. Indeed, Obejas’ collection shows particularly clearly the ways that nationalism, sexuality, and gender mutually construct one another and queers those categories, while García’s novel underlines the connections between race, nationality, and the family in order to upset those taken-for-granted notions.

Reviewing recent Cuban history reveals the distinct fractures within the Cuban-American family. Cuban-American history is, to say the least, complex. Though Cuban immigrant presence in the United States predates Castro’s revolution in 1959, that year marked a watershed unique in U.S. Latino history, both because many more Cubans immigrated than ever before in such a short time, as a recent Pew Research Center report shows (Lopez and Krogstad), and because they were ostensibly fleeing a Communist 
*coup d’etat* at a time when Soviet hegemony was on many minds. For this reason, as well as because exile precludes the back-and-forth flow that has characterized migration between the U.S. and Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, Cubans have often been figured as “different” from other Latinos/as in the U.S. Besides having a long-standing presence in the United States and/or U.S. citizenship, Mexican-Americans and

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3 Of course, the fact that the story lends its title to the collection as a whole supports this claim as well.
Puerto Ricans were the most populous and influential Latino groups during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. While Mexican Americans in the Southwest were developing the literature of El Movimiento and Chicano consciousness, and Puerto Ricans in the Northeast were involved in the Nuyorican poetry movement, the Young Lords, and other Puerto Rican pride movements (many of these movements, it should be noted, associated with Marxism), Cubans were reacting against a different set of complex assumptions about them by Anglo America. The particular political circumstances under which the first major wave of Cuban immigrants came to the United States made possible two things: first, that Cubans would be seen sympathetically as refugees from an oppressive and enemy political system, since the U.S. in 1959 was just ramping up the Cold War; and second, that they would therefore be more analogous to other “ethnic” whites fleeing Communism (like the “fat Hungarian lady” in Obejas’ story “We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?”) than to other resident Latino/a groups. In fact, since many of the first wave of Cuban immigrants after the revolution were, in fact, middle-class citizens of a society in which, like the United States, race and class were often directly correlated, many of them were “white or white-identifying” (Allatson as qtd. in On Latinidad 95).

Race plays a big part in determining who belongs in the nation-as-family metaphor, of course. As in the nuclear family, so in the national one, runs the logic: those who belong look a certain way, and look like each other. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo

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4 Mexican-Americans are by far the most populous nationality within the U.S. Latino/a collective even today, with 34,582,182 in 2013, according to recent Pew Research Center publications; Puerto Ricans are a distant second at 5,121,921, still significantly more than the next most populous group, Cubans, who are closely followed by Salvadorans and Dominicans, with just under 2 million each (Stepler and Brown).
notes in *On Latinidad*, anti-Communist Cubans were already positioning themselves as white even before socialism had been declared in Cuba: “the ‘anticommunism’ of the Cubans who became exiles was intricately connected to a self-presentation, both in Cuba and, later, in the United States, as racially white,” she claims (95). A slogan predating the revolution, “Neither Red nor Black,” gestures at the confluence of racism and political orientation for white, middle- and upper-class Cubans (Sarduy and Stubbs as qtd. in *On Latinidad* 95). Such attitudes about race and political affiliation would be helpful not only in assimilating into American society, with its own similar iteration of color-based racism, but in distancing oneself from darker-skinned Cubans and those who might not denounce the revolution. That is to say, if “real” Cubans are “neither black nor red,” then dark-skinned or socialist Cubans would not count as “real” Cubans, supporting the idea that Castro’s revolution had wrested the island from the “real” Cubans, who did not see themselves as *immigrants to* the U.S. but rather as *exiles from* Cuba.

Cuban American Latino/a writing presents a fascinating case study for exploring the intersectionality, as Collins calls it, of family. It is hardly surprising, given the prevalence of the nation-as-family metaphor, to find novels that deal with the national rupture that Castro’s revolution entailed through the trope of familial estrangement. The *way* this estrangement is elaborated through fiction, however, can either reinforce patriarchal and oppressive norms, or open up space for reconsideration of what, exactly, makes one part of a family—or a nation. *The Agüero Sisters* imagines this rupture allegorically as part of a literal nuclear family’s split and (semi-)reconciliation, while *We Came All The Way* explores different ways and means of making familia without settling on any one method or configuration as “the” most liberatory or best one.
Both García and Obejas revisit themes of *cubanidad*, race, and identity throughout their work,\(^5\) which could also be productively examined through the lens of family. In fact, Obejas’ novel *Memory Mambo* has been more frequently paired with García’s first two novels (*Dreaming In Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*) in critical articles than *We Came All The Way*. I suspect this is in part because *Memory Mambo* is generically similar to García’s novels (as opposed to *We Came All The Way*, a collection of short stories) and in part because they are more obviously similar in theme, since *Memory Mambo* is a type of bildungsroman, like *Dreaming In Cuban*, as well as a multi-generational family saga uncovering secrets, like *The Agüero Sisters*. I have chosen to focus on *We Came All The Way*, recognizing that similar thematic strands run through *Memory Mambo*, because it emphasizes the fragmentation and diversity of Obejas’ familial reconstructions so well and because the collection as a whole is currently under-represented in the critical literature. *The Agüero Sisters*, for its part, in its focus not on the Americanized daughter of a Cuban immigrant (as in *Dreaming in Cuban*), but on the Cuban immigrant herself and her sister, as well as their family history and legacy, provides rich territory to cultivate theories on the deployment of family as a trope for nation-building.

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Familia Dividida in The Agüero Sisters

The Agüero Sisters dramatizes Cuba’s broken national family in the split between half sisters Constancia and Reina Agüero. The girls grow up together in pre-revolutionary Cuba, and while Constancia leaves in 1959, Reina stays behind to lend her skills as an electrician to the revolution. Their parents, Blanca and Ignacio, are scientists who go on expeditions around Cuba collecting specimens of flora and fauna. Ignacio has published several books on Cuban wildlife and plants and is a well-respected scholar in biological science. The novel is structured in almost-chronological narrative layers, with italicized excerpts narrated by Ignacio (from his memoir) interleaved with sections focalized through various characters but told from a third-person point of view, moving through time linearly. (The only exception is Dulce Fuerte, Reina’s daughter, who narrates her few sections in a first-person voice.) The novel opens with the third-person narration of Ignacio’s murder of Blanca by shooting her in the throat during one of their collecting expeditions in the Zapata Swamp. From there, we learn of the couple’s courtship and troubled marriage, Blanca’s abandonment of Ignacio and Constancia and her return pregnant with Reina, Reina’s insomnia as an adult and her near-fatal accident involving lightning that requires her to receive dozens of skin grafts, Constancia’s retirement to Miami from New York with her second husband Heberto Cruz, Heberto’s plans to participate in a Bay of Pigs-style invasion led by his brother Gonzalo (Constancia’s first

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6 Ignacio is not Reina’s biological father, but she refers to him as her father throughout the book, even as she is aware that he is not her “real” father.

7 Dulce’s lone first-person distinction is interesting, suggesting the reader see her narrative parallel to her (pseudo-)grandfather, Ignacio; indeed, as I suggest in my reading below, Dulce’s saturnine worldview is the flip-side of Ignacio’s bright, scientific optimism, its dark, logical conclusion in an overpopulated and polluted world.
husband and great love), and the activities of Silvestre (Gonzalo and Constancia’s son), Isabel (Heberto and Constancia’s daughter), and Dulce. At the novel’s close, a newly-pregnant Reina, Dulce, Isabel, and Isabel’s infant son, Raku, have all converged in Constancia’s Miami apartment, while Constancia has gone to Cuba to finally solve the mystery of her mother’s death, recover Heberto’s body (since he dies in the invasion attempt), and put an end to the mysterious accidents she has been experiencing by completing a Santería ritual in her homeland. The novel closes with Ignacio’s narration of Blanca’s murder.

The novel sets up the sisters to seem like polar opposites of each other: the lusty, Afro-Caribbean Cuban woman who remains in Cuba after the revolution, and the uptight, light-skinned Cuban who flees in 1959. Constancia is an avid capitalist and a consummately feminine woman, sexually repressed and subservient to her husband. Meanwhile, earthy, sensual, dark-skinned Reina enthusiastically supports la revolución, takes many lovers, and works as a skilled electrician in Cuba. While Reina’s bodily integrity is literally sacrificed in service of the state, prompting her finally to leave Cuba, Constancia’s controlled body is a monument to femininity at any cost; she claims, early in the novel, that “[i]f she doesn’t look good, it hurts her a lot more than a mere pair of heels” (21). Constancia’s business venture, a line of lotions and creams called Cuerpo de Cuba, commodifies the (Cuban) body as so many parts (Muslos de Cuba, Senos de Cuba, Cuello de Cuba, Cara de Cuba, etc.). The business deals in nostalgia, that hallmark of Cuban exiles—her buyers feel more Cuban after they use her products, they say (García 132). By contrast, Reina, sexually unrepressed and completely unconcerned with fashion and conventional femininity, wonders why any woman would hate her body, and points
out that cellulite has never been a deterrent to passion (García 162). While it is the scents of Constancia’s creams and lotions that evoke a lost, Edenic Cuba of childhood, for Reina what becomes an object of nostalgia is her own scent, destroyed after her skin graft surgery as a direct result of her trust in and service to the Cuban government. Both mourn the loss of something—childhood or idealism—that cannot be brought back.

Thus, by the time the novel ends, these two polar opposites have been complicated into more nuanced portraits of cubanidad, and their reconciliation with each other seems imminent, though it remains “offstage.” Family, as Lyn Di Iorio Sandín points out in her deft reading, operates as an allegory for national identity in *The Agüero Sisters* (in contrast to *Dreaming in Cuban*), since the split in identity is inscribed in the foundational romance of the nation itself and not in an individual, modern character (like Pilar in *Dreaming*). As Di Iorio points out, in *The Agüero Sisters*, this foundational family romance is actually a murder of the mulata mother by the white father, paralleling the violent suppression of Afro-Cuban spirituality and identity that occurred during colonization. One popular reading, then, of the end of the novel is to see it as an allegory representing the potential for “national reconciliation,” as the “Reader’s Guide” at the end of my Ballantine One World paperback edition puts it. Strong female characters prevail over remarkable odds and trauma to find out the truth and start a new life supporting each other, no patriarchal figures in sight.

*The Agüero Sisters*, along with García’s first novel, *Dreaming In Cuban*, has generally been well-received critically; most critics agree that the family in the novel

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8 Ilan Stavans, however, expresses “ambivalent” feelings about *The Agüero Sisters* in his review for *The Nation*, characterizing it as “magisterial melodrama,” and claiming that “one could easily confuse it with the latest prime-time telenovela on Univision” (32). He immediately adds that
represents the larger Cuban/Cuban-American community, and that the ending of the novel suggests hopeful reconciliation between the sisters and, by extension, between the two communities of Cubans, those who stayed in Cuba and those who left, even if that reconciliation is not obviously “happy.” For example, Teresa Derrickson argues that the novel offers hope of agency in the face of globalized capitalism, and outlines the many ways that the novel aligns the Agüero family history with Cuban history. Emron Esplin asserts that the novel shows Cuban-Americans how to reconcile their North American present with their Cuban past, by accepting both positive and negative memories of the homeland (instead of focusing solely on positive ones in a romanticizing nostalgia).

Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt sees the use of Santería in the novel as “a means of reconciling not just the two sisters but Cuban society as a whole” (Marmolejo-McWatt 90), while Julee Tate reads Constancia’s and Reina’s relationships with their mother, Blanca, as representative of their relationship to Cuba, suggesting hope and the possibility of healing. Concepción Bados Ciria sees the novel as advocating a particularly feminine form of reconciliation, where “women’s dreams, memories, and personal

Garcia’s literary style is “astonishing” and her attention to detail “dazzling,” but reiterates that the novel is “ruled by primal emotions, bordering on the ersatz,” just like a novela (32). I explain in detail in Chapter Two why this characterization of Latina literature is troubling to me; in large part, it is because it flattens the feminist or subversive possibilities of the literature bearing the tag of “melodrama.” (Who, after all, are melodrama and telenovelas for if not women, whose tastes are presumed to run to the domestic and the personal?) I do not mean to suggest that Stavans consciously believes such a thing about women in general, but by his own admission, he sees the main unifying thread of Latina literature to be melodrama. Constructing the kind of circular argument that makes feminists tear their hair in frustration, he asserts that melodrama “has a habit of infiltrating all literature…especially among Latinas,” probably, he hypothesizes, because of the emotional cast of “Hispanic culture” and the “signal influence of soap operas” (34). In other words, Latinas write melodramas because Latinas are melodramatic and consume melodramatic media. As I argue in Chapter Three, it does a disservice to the literature to characterize it in this way. Stavans, in concluding that The Agüero Sisters is melodrama, misses the things that do not conform to the melodramatic soap opera plot he sees—namely the ways that a “happy family” trope is evoked and then withheld in various ways, even as hopefulness and possibility is hinted at.
relationships can begin to heal the wounds of a divided nation” (510). Lyn Di Iorio Sandín’s supple allegorical reading identifies a proliferation of psychological “doubles” echoing each other throughout the novel that function as “embellishment” along the “horizontal axis” of the story. Meanwhile, the main, “vertical axis” of the story is Constancia’s discovery of the truth about her mother and father. Di Iorio characterizes Blanca and Ignacio’s relationship as “[enacting] the relationship between essential Cuban/Caribbean identity and assimilative/logocentric Cuban-American identity” (19).

In contrast to these critics, however, I assert that close consideration of the theme of family and nation reveals that there is an unsettling quality in the novel that both suggests that healing is possible and also highlights the sacrifices necessary to get there, withholding the healing scene that so many critics (and readers) intuit from the closing events.

Ignacio, the son of a Spaniard, is the consummate European-identified Cuban español criollo; in the national “family” metaphor, he is the “father,” the conquering European, making Blanca the indigenous/African “mother” of the nation. Ignacio’s sinister side simply reinforces his role as the “father” of Cuba. Though he lacks passion, he nonetheless hungers to possess Blanca, whom he perceives as magical and mysterious, exerting an inexplicable pull over anyone within her orbit. Once they are married, however, Ignacio perceives Blanca as incomprehensible, denying her a salary for the

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9 Unlike in the United States, where the term “Creole” as a descriptor of a person or people usually denotes ethnic mixing, in the Spanish casta system of racial and social classification, an español criollo was someone whose parents or other direct antecedents were Spanish, but who was born in the colonies. An español peninsular was a Spaniard born in the Spanish peninsula. These terms were used to distinguish those of European descent from each other and from the indigenous and African peoples who also populated the Americas, though the term applies widely and in various ways now. It often simply means “local.”
work for which he had previously paid her and attributing her ambivalence about motherhood to madness and/or her involvement with Santería—mysterious forces that Ignacio, the good rationalist, does not understand. Like a European “explorer” displaying the “savages” he has found in the New Word (and like the birds he studies, kills, and displays), Ignacio is proud of his wife but deeply uninterested in her inner life or feelings—indeed, that is what is so appealing about the animal kingdom to him:

“Analyzing people is infinitely more taxing than distinguishing between even the subtlest variations in subspecies,” he says to a young Constancia (García 134). Ignacio is also a murderer and a liar, though he claims his lies were “reluctant” and the murder he characterizes as practically involuntary, an “invitation” from the hummingbird near Blanca (299-300).

There could be no clearer characterization of the process of Spanish colonization than Ignacio: he is interested in music and scientific truths, in expanding knowledge of the natural world, but he is also homicidal, possessive, patriarchal, racist, and classist, frantically (but eloquently) excusing and justifying his heinous deeds. Blanca, the mythic, murdered mother, the pale mulatta with an Afro-Cuban santero lover, the civilized woman with a savage edge, is not only completely silenced, like so many women and Afro-Cubans—effectively “collected” by her scientist husband—but romanticized by her husband and children alike as a sort of Eden, a person whose love can sustain or fix anything (and whose absence, therefore, is the missing link to happiness and wholeness). Like modern-day Cubans, exile or not, who search for meaning and identity in an unrecoverable past, Reina and Constancia, and even Ignacio, pine for Blanca, each
mourning his or her own personal version of paradise that Blanca somehow did not fulfill.

Yet García does not leave Ignacio as the only father figure, unsettling the nuclear family drama of *cubanidad*. Instead, she adds the mysterious “giant mulatto” who bears an “[unmistakable] resemblance to Reina,” Ignacio reports (265). This unnamed father is present, but suppressed, echoing the fractured parental lines that slavery forced upon millions. Just as other stories and discourses have been ignored or subordinated to the European-influenced point of view throughout the history of Cuba, the “mulatto” father only speaks once, to Reina at her mother’s grave (194), and readers never know his name, just as many Africans brought to the New World lost their original names. Ignacio, meanwhile, is afforded several short chapters to explain himself—these chapters form the parts of his memoir that Constancia finds at her mother’s family’s ranch in Cuba, in which he admits to murdering his wife, among other things (297).

Ignacio’s repeated use of the word “unmistakable” in relation to the “mulatto” is telling; though Ignacio is apparently sure of what and who this person is, his character is completely undeveloped in Ignacio’s narrative (or anywhere else in the novel). Ignacio “knows” the “mulatto” without having to really know him because of the racist logic that equates “them” as all the same. The signifiers of his devotion to Changó, Blanca’s (supposed) disheveled mental and physical state when she returns to Ignacio, and even (or especially) the man’s skin color justify Ignacio in thinking that the things he feels about him are “unmistakable”; in other words, Ignacio feels sure that Blanca has cheated on him with this man as well as that this man possesses some kind of supernatural, African-inflected potency that Ignacio himself lacks—two “certainties” that reflect most
on Ignacio’s own insecurities and prejudices than they do on the “giant mulatto.”

Crucially, the only other time we see Reina’s father is when Reina herself recalls encountering him as an adult at her mother’s grave: “He crouched next to me and looked at Dulcita’s picture. “She is very beautiful. And very wild. Like you, mi hija”” (194).

Though Ignacio perceives the man as “other,” Reina’s humanizing focalization recuperates this character, and the system of belief he represents, into part of the family, albeit a shadowy one.

Finally, Blanca’s family of brothers and a father, the Mestre men who live on a ranch in Camagüey, add their own complicating strands to the linear nuclear family drama that Ignacio and Blanca seem to represent. Ignacio reports that Blanca is dismissive about these family members, claiming that she would like to forget her father’s “sorry, dissolute face” (188). Blanca is the only girl, and the youngest, among seven, and none of her brothers marry. When Constancia is sent to this ranch as a little girl (at Blanca’s insistence), she discovers that her bachelor uncles “penetrate” mares “and each other” regularly (216). Though she notes that the “mares would walk around snorting for an hour or more, with their tails slightly askew,” Constancia notices that there is “nothing different about the men” (216). Besides her uncles, her grandfather is also rendered perverse; he asks Constancia to accompany him during his baths, where, though he does not touch her, he pays a lot of attention to washing his penis and sighing (216). These undertones of sexual perversity are never explicitly developed, but taken together with Blanca’s traumatized reactions to marriage and motherhood, as well as Constancia’s fear that “similar violence” [i.e., sex] would happen to her one day, these details further undermine the idea of a mythic, Edenic past free from strife. Instead,
perversity and exploitation are ever-present; even Eugenia Mestre Sejourné, Blanca’s mother, is a descendent of French colonists fleeing Haiti.

**“We Travel In the Family”: Santería as unifier.** Santería\(^\text{10}\) is a system of belief indigenous to the Caribbean that arose from the mixing of Yoruban religious beliefs and Spanish Roman Catholicism. The simplified origin story of this religious system is that Africans who were brought to the Caribbean as slaves were often forced to adopt Catholicism and abandon their own religious and cultural practices. However, they continued to worship in their own way surreptitiously, and eventually Yoruban deities were associated with the identities of Catholic saints, and rituals, holidays, and practices of both religions showed up in the resulting mixture. Although orishas, or spirits, don’t necessarily have stable identities, genders, or associations, varying regionally and personally, in Santería today, there are seven primary orishas, including: Changó, who is associated with Saint Barbara, lightning, virility, and the colors red and white, among other things; Oshún, associated with the colors gold, yellow, or amber, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, rivers, sexuality, femininity, and womanhood; and Yemayá, the great mother, associated with the color blue, the Virgin of Regla, the sea, pregnancy, and all living things (“Orishas”). Perhaps the symbol of New World hybridity *par excellence*, Santería makes one “family” out of two distinct ones—though, just as with patriarchal families, this image of “two become one” does not mean that equality has been achieved or that both parts are equally represented. In fact, since its roots are in the repression of Yoruban and other non-Christian religious systems, Santería’s “family” is decidedly

\(^\text{10}\) Though Spanish and other non-English words are italicized throughout this dissertation, I am capitalizing and leaving unitalicized the word “Santería” in order to reflect both its status as a legitimate religion, akin to Christianity and Islam, for example, as well as its popularity in the United States, and not only among monolingual Spanish-speakers.
unequal; Christianity was the legitimizing cover that enabled the “pagan” gods to survive in a hostile new environment, not the equal and respected partner of them.

Well into the 20th century, in both Cuba and elsewhere, including the United States, Santería was dismissed as a superstition of the lower-classes (the same view that Ignacio takes of it in The Agüero Sisters). The word “santería,” in fact, was initially a pejorative applied by the Spanish to what they saw as their slaves’ excessive adoration for the saints at the expense of the Christian deity (Hall). In the same way that the ideal español criollo (and, later, the ideal Cuban) was as far away from African influences as possible, so, too, was Roman Catholicism the official religion of Cuba, in spite of the vast population of Afro-Cubans who practiced Santería. In part because it upsets the parent-child relationship that colonial Cuba had with Spain, I would argue, Santería had to be hidden away, as in the Latin American Caribbean proverb about the “black grandmother” in the kitchen. Circling back to the conversation at the outset of this chapter about Cuban national identity (and later, Cuban-American identity), Santería until quite recently did not have a place in an imaginary that excluded Afro-Cubans as “real” Cubans.

In The Agüero Sisters, references to Santería are plentiful, if not exactly systematic. For example, in one of the first scenes in the book, the text establishes that Reina is sensual and powerful, and then she is struck by lightning. Both of these things associate her with Changó, but it is ambiguous whether she is being punished by him or drawn close to him (after all, the lightning does not kill her). Further, she is struck by the lightning next to a copper mine in El Cobre, where Oshún’s Catholic saint’s shrine, la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, resides. Reina asks the nurse after the skin-graft surgery to tie one maroon and one red ribbon to the foot of her hospital bed, “just in case”
Changó and Oyá, the “fractious lovers,” need appeasing (36). Reina’s long-time Cuban lover, Pepín, tries unsuccessfully to cure her insomnia by using a white rooster in a Santería ritual conducted over her sleepless body (39). Santería is the system that Constancia turns to, seemingly by chance, in order to save her failing business, but instead it leads her to the truth about her own mother and father and returns her to Cuba. The Miami santero she consults, Oscar Piñango, operates for her more as an independent contractor than a spiritual leader, instructing her in various purifying and divining rituals; that is, Constancia does not seem set on a path towards initiation into Santería, but towards the truth about herself. Ignacio, for his part, strongly associates Blanca with Oshún and Reina’s father with Changó. As Di Iorio notes, for Ignacio, Santería represents that which he cannot explain or control; his depiction of Blanca as mystical and unknowable is a projection of the messy, unpredictable, human emotions he experiences and cannot immediately catalogue, like his birds and flora (26).

Referring to García’s first novel, Dreaming in Cuban, Margarite Fernández Olmos claims that “initiated readers,” as she refers to those readers personally (rather than academically) familiar with Santería and espiritismo practices, will find references to these practices “both familiar and disconcerting” (83). To measure García by the yardstick of “initiation,” however, is somewhat to miss the point. Despite that, to an initiated reader, as Fernández calls them, García’s references to Santería may scan as

11 She goes on to quote García’s acknowledgement in an interview that her own familiarity with Santería came as an adult, but that she agrees with her character, Pilar, that it makes a lot more sense than “more abstract forms of worship” (as qtd. in Fernández 83; original in López 107). For Fernández, the fact of García’s uninitiated status is cause enough to be disconcerted by her depictions of Santería. Indeed, the other plays, novels, and memoirs Fernández cites seem to demonstrate an “initiated” understanding of the religion as a real spiritual practice better than either of García’s novels, whatever their other merits.
somewhat clunky, these references are more than window-dressing or the literary equivalent of a dash of spice. She is right to notice that Santería is not being “used” for its own sake in the novels—that is, the novels are not a sociological description or depiction of real, practicing Santería communities—but Santería functions in the novel as a way for García to acknowledge the continuing presence, influence, and legacy in Cuba and the United States of Afro-Cubans. Through this acknowledgment, García reshapes the narrative of Cuban “family” as a white, conservative, middle-class entity that has dominated in Cuban exile communities for so long, for example, in novels like Margarita Engle’s *Skywriting* and *Singing in Cuba*.

*Ambivalent family reunions.* Though the ending of *The Agüero Sisters* may lend itself to a reading of return to origins and familial reunification, it actually realizes a nuanced portrait of Cuban family that complicates stereotypes. The novel achieves this in part through introducing ambivalence about the Cuban revolution and complicating stereotypes about Cubans through the characters of Dulce Fuerte and Silvestre Cruz. Both of these children are seriously at odds with their mothers and more or less abandoned by their fathers, and alienated from Cuba itself.

Compared to her mother, Reina, Dulce has a considerably less sanguine view on the revolution. She must engage in sex work with the European and Canadian tourists in Havana in order to survive, and eventually she marries a Spaniard she does not love in order to escape. However, she finds life in Madrid just as difficult as life in Havana. Dulce claims that Fidel’s biggest propaganda success has been his declaration that there is no AIDS in Cuba, a claim that is both a subtle nod to the Castro regime’s famous homophobia, and one that attracts the very tourists whose business allows Dulce to
survive (51). Dulce, in contrast to her name, is quite bitter, not just about Castro’s government, but about life in general; her sections are some of the darkest points in the novel. For example, after leaving her madrileño husband, Dulce gets a job as a nanny in a mansion; she reads to the toddler from the newspapers about “the polar ice caps…melting and the half-degree rise in the temperature of the earth’s surface [that] is killing off countless forms of life” (142). Later, during a fortune telling, she thinks “of how antibiotics were losing their effectiveness against disease” (143). Her focus on man-made environmental disaster is the negative complement to her grandfather’s desire to catalogue and name all Cuban flora and fauna; while Ignacio’s acquisitiveness surrounding knowledge is rooted in a basic optimism that the natural world is knowable and predictable, Dulce gives voice to the worries and pessimism of a generation that must deal with the aftermath of its grandparents’ ambitions. Rather than become mired in nostalgia, as the generation before her does, Dulce resists all outside attempts to define her, including her family’s and the State’s. Though she ends up with her cousins and mother in Miami, she does not return out of some longing to be reunited with them, but because she is literally out of options and out of money; in order to raise the money to fly from Madrid to Miami, Dulce must briefly resort to prostitution again.

The end of the novel, where Reina, Isabel and Dulce are gathered together in a harmonious, if unconventional, family, while Constancia journeys to Cuba to put the finishing touches on her discovery of the truth, seems happy. It has a very late-1990s “girl power” ring to it. For example, there are no men in sight but they have not been actively or purposely excluded because they are men. Reina mothers Isabel, who also mothers her, in a way, allowing Reina to suckle from her breast (241). Dulce, finally, can
simply exist without needing to hustle or justify herself to anyone. She gets a job at a sandwich shop, where she learns how to make *medianoches*—traditional pork-laden sandwiches no one in the Cuba she left could afford. We can assume that Dulce will continue to guardedly feel safe, that Reina will have her child, and that Isabel and Raku will continue to thrive. The only thing that mars this happy ending is that Silvestre is missing from it, quite conspicuously, and the other two contemporaneous male characters, Gonzalo and Heberto, are dead. Quite literally, then, the patriarchal but also the gay and the politically strident are absent from this utopic reconciliation scene at the end of the novel. This makes it difficult to conclude that the novel endorses this new family configuration of all women as progressive, since other voices have had to be violently silenced in order to arrive at this point. Instead, the novel presents one version of reconfigured family without suppressing the sacrifices this reconfiguration requires.

For example, the narrator, focalized through Reina, likens her developing pregnancy to a hummingbird in a “net of blood” (294), yet it is a hummingbird that flutters before Blanca’s throat just before Ignacio shoots her. The hopefulness of the new life in Reina seems at odds with the violence of Blanca’s murder, but the novel supplies no definitive answers here. Likewise, the novel shows the violence required to get to the “happy immigrant family” image that Constancia eventually reaches in New York, including a traumatic ocean crossing, abandonment of her son, abandonment by her husband, and a driving work ethic that means, even on days off, Constancia works with Heberto at their cigar store. This is not a tidy or happy ending, really, but one that invites further reflection and questions.
Silvestre’s role in the novel, while easy to shunt aside because it seems so minor, is another upheaval of conventional notions of family and nation. He is Gonzalo’s son, but because Gonzalo abandons his wife and son, Heberto, Constancia’s second-choice husband and Silvestre’s uncle, raises him. Echoing Constancia’s own childhood exile to the ranch, Silvestre is sent away as a “Pedro Pan” to Denver, one of the many Cuban children sent to the U.S. shortly after the revolution in order to avoid what their parents feared would be Communist brainwashing, where he contracts an illness that leaves him deaf. After he grows up and moves out of the house, Constancia sends him money as a way to assuage her guilt about sending him away as a child, and he eventually uses this nest egg to travel from New York to Miami, kill the slowly dying Gonzalo, and disappear into Mexico.

Silvestre’s marginality in *The Agüero Sisters* is striking in relation to Susana Peña’s thesis, in “‘Obvious Gays’ and the State Gaze.” There, she discusses how being identified as gay in Cuba was a ticket out during the Mariel boatlift, leading many to perform in a stereotypically gay way in front of officials—to be “obvious.” Once in the U.S., however, such an “obvious” display of gayness had to be muted. Many gay male *marielitos* ended up in detention centers, sometimes for years, as the U.S. decided what to do with them. Though Silvestre is not a *marielito*, he, too, participates in the “detention center” experience that many *marielitos* endured, since he is sent far away from home, all alone, to live among strangers. This experience is what isolates him not only from his country, but from his family; Silvestre’s fever, according to him, was a result of missing the warmth of Cuba: “he willed the fever within him…Even today, Silvestre can recall the first spiking of his temperature, the glow of Cuba remembered shimmering off his
skin” (243). Cuba is thus complexly tied to Silvestre’s exile from his family—in this case, the exile does not result in prosperity and riches, as it does for Constancia and Heberto, but in disability and isolation, even a second, self-imposed “exile” to Mexico. His very name—“wild” in English—alludes to his unassimilable identity, not to American culture, but to Cuban: he changes his name to Jack Cross and dates men from a range of backgrounds. Unlike Silvestre, however, stereotypes of “Latin” Miami gays, especially Cuban ones, from the 1980s and 1990s are of loud and flamboyant characters who are unable to really assimilate to U.S. culture but don’t seem to care—e.g., Hank Azaria’s Agador Spartacus in The Birdcage. In some ways, then, Silvestre perfectly conforms to (performs) the strictures of gayness in the United States—that gayness be closeted, silent, and not “obvious,”—and resists the stereotype of Latin sexuality—that it be loud, outsized.12 It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is, at least in part, Silvestre’s gayness that isolates him from his Cubanness and his family.

Silvestre’s story also complicates the “happy immigrant family” image that Constancia projects. Some deep intergenerational incestuous desire emanates from Constancia, who cannot help but see Gonzalo in her son, to Silvestre. Constancia is unable to breastfeed him because of the pleasure it causes her (though she nurses Isabel without issue), and during Silvestre’s adolescence, she finds herself spying on him in the shower and “running a finger along his quiet hip bone” as he sleeps (García 107). Yet rather than reciprocating these Oedipal feelings, Silvestre bucks Constancia’s expectations by being gay—not only rejecting his mother but all women as potential sexual partners. Once his mother catches him in the act of fellatio as a 24-year-old, he

12 This trope continues today with characters like Sofia Vergara’s Gloria Delgado-Pritchett on Modern Family.
moves out and basically disappears from her life. Rather than being grateful for the sacrifices she has made “for” him (a theme explored in Obejas), Silvestre recognizes the desires that animate Constancia’s actions towards him (her unresolved passion for Gonzalo) and flees.

The children, therefore, complicate the “happy family” image that a focus solely on Reina and Constancia might suggest. While Reina and Constancia do, indeed, end up reconciled by the end of the novel (or at least, on the same page about their family history), Silvestre’s absence, and Constancia’s complicated relationship with him, makes this ending denser than a narrative of reconciliation would suggest. Rather than simply focusing on the “main” story between the titular sisters, opening the story out into the lives, ambitions, and fates of the children forestalls any easy assumptions about Cuban and Cuban-American identity, or the routes that one might take to reuniting the two Cuban populations. In short, the novel queers the future, in José Muñoz’s sense, by representing the (adult) children of the main characters as part of an unknowable futurity, different from their parents as well as shaped by them.

*Achy Obejas’ Familia Rota*

Juan Flores, in his insightful book *From Bomba To Hip-Hop*, posits that there are two major approaches to being Latino/a in the U.S.: there are the “assimilationist” writers (who privilege the stories of middle-class and recently-arrived immigrants) and the “resistant” writers (who write from the perspective of long-settled non-Anglo populations in U.S.) (Flores 173-76). Flores later posits that what really brings cohesion to the notion of the Latino/a canon—what he calls the “Latino/a imaginary”—is a concern with social justice, civil rights, and general sympathy with liberatory and radical politics (Flores
200). (Of course, for U.S. Latinas/os observing the politics of Latin America, those liberal and/or radical politics’ most famous Latin American metonyms are Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.) Marta Caminero-Santangelo, in a chapter of On Latinidad titled “The Latino Imaginary’ and the Case of Cuba,” explains how the Cuban exile community (among other, “less liberatory” Latino/a writers) upsets this popular notion of Flores’ “Latino/a imaginary” as necessarily radical, left-leaning, or liberal, since U.S. Cubans are famously much more conservative than either Mexican-Americans or Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (On Latinidad 163). (Caminero-Santangelo cites Margarita Engle’s novels, mentioned above, as representative examples of this conservative vein in Cuban American culture.) Nonetheless, as Caminero-Santangelo points out later, Achy Obejas’ work (as well as Cristina García’s) “aligns itself with leftist politics in other ways” (180)—notably, by reflecting on the implications of gay and lesbian identity within a Cuban—and larger Latino/a—collective. (Still, Flores’ left-leaning “Latino imaginary” may be part of the reason why both García and Obejas are frequently included in Latino literature canons, while more conservative and reactionary Cuban-American writers usually are not.)

Obejas’ short stories in We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This? continually revisit the theme of family in various iterations: queer, chosen, convenient, broken. Unlike in The Agüero Sisters, where the Agüero family stands in for the Cuban national family and/or Cuban history, in We Came All The Way, the stories work together to both refuse and forge connections between various sexual, ethnic, racial, and class groups, and end up articulating a version of queer Latinidad that refuses “family” as a stable locus of meaning. Instead of depicting Latino/a characters
sequestered within particular nationality groups or with certain political affiliations, *We Came All The Way* shows Latino/a characters, often gay or lesbian, making cross-nationality affiliations and refusing the fetters of heteronormative family at some points and seeking them out at others. Though only one story is explicitly about the Cuban experience as it relates to exile from Cuba as a result of Castro’s revolution, this story, in my reading, is the key to drawing the rest of the collection together as a unified whole. In this story, leaving Cuba—breaking up the Cuban family—enables as much as it forecloses, just as the breaking of heteronormative families in the other stories both destroy and create possibilities.

All of the stories in this collection present multiple different kinds of familial relations and kinship configurations, few of which are heteronormative (or even patriarchal capitalist) families. Instead of examining the nation-as-family trope as refracted through the broken family of the Cuban revolution, these stories focus on family as a broken ideal, something productive of tension, but still formative. As the accusation embedded in the title of the collection implies, family can carry with it restrictive and limiting baggage. Although most critics focus on the title story of this collection, which concerns a nuclear family immigrating to the United States from Cuba, looking at the collection as a whole enriches readings of the title story, and vice versa. Each story features a refusal of heteronormativity. What queers them, and what makes them queer, is that they continually question definitions of “family” and inquire whether it is, in fact, necessary.\(^{13}\) There is not a driving anti-family ethos animating the stories, but nor is there

\(^{13}\) While queerness can refer very specifically to a sort of anti-family ethos, as in Lee Edelman’s “queer death drive,” in this chapter, I am using this term specifically to mean “non-
an assumption that “family” is a basic social good. Instead of the stereotypical close-knit immigrant family, this collection presents stories of connections and bonds forged and broken, the strongest ones often not between parents and children—or even spouses, the other “family” members normalized within heteronormative nuclear families—but friends and strangers, ex-girlfriends and random one-night stands. Queerness, here, challenges both national and family narratives.

“Above All, A Family Man” explores the relationship between Rogelio, a Latino immigrant in Chicago, and an Anglo gay man, Tommy, who narrates the story. Rogelio has a wife and children, and steadfastly identifies as “a family man”—which for him does not preclude sex with a man. As Tommy explains, he is not homo- or heterosexual, but simply “sexual…as capable of sex with a cantaloupe as with a woman or a man. It’s a definition that deals in quantity and athleticism and has little, if any, relationship to love or pleasure” (53). In spite of this, it is Rogelio who initiates their relationship at a beach where Rogelio’s children interrupt Tommy’s sunbathing. They continue to see each other after this somewhat inauspicious encounter, and when Tommy finds out he is HIV positive, Rogelio both denies that he could possibly have it (since he is not “a homosexual”) and begins to nurse Tommy tenderly whenever he can as Tommy becomes increasingly ill. Tommy makes plans to live out the rest of his days with friends in Santa Fe, and Rogelio agrees to drive him there. During this trip, they stop in St. Louis to see the Arch, where the story ends. However, this is not a story where two aging men, one dying of AIDS and one closeted, manage to carve out a monogamous dyad against all the homophobia they face in straight society—far from it. Instead, Rogelio turns his back on heteronormative” more broadly, which does not necessarily eclipse or occlude the former meaning.
Tommy when they are in public at the Arch, panicked that he might be identified as this sick man’s boyfriend, and Tommy’s anger over Rogelio’s public denial of him (the last of many) is the closing note of this story. Rogelio, Tommy tells us, “pleads” with Tommy via his look to forgive him for the betrayal. “I want to ask him how much he expects me to take,” Tommy says (70). It is the final line of the story, a question ominous for its lack of an answer.

In their complete focus on the here-and-now, either because of other commitments and unwillingness to envision same-sex romantic partnership (Rogelio) or because of impending death (Tommy), Rogelio and Tommy form a queer family together. Indeed, Rogelio’s ministrations to Tommy when Tommy sickens are like those of a parent to a child; Rogelio checks in on Tommy, brings him groceries, makes him soups, and tucks him into bed—“all parental skills,” Rogelio says (54). Yet Rogelio is “parenting” a man whose future is going to be short and painful.

Tommy, for his part, seems to want Rogelio to not only “come out” as gay, but to be in a relationship with him—to acknowledge him in public, to stop “denying” him; indeed, these are one and the same to Tommy. To acknowledge Tommy in public as his boyfriend would be the same as Rogelio coming out of the closet that Tommy assumes he is in, since for Tommy, such public displays are part of being out and proud. Tommy recounts the “summer of 1978,” when every new relationship was eventually displayed through public handholding—a bid from the “boys” in New Town (now Boystown; “the” gay neighborhood in Chicago) to make two men holding hands as “normal as taking a baby out for a stroll” (Obejas 63). This domestic, familial comparison is not coincidental. Tommy powerfully articulates his desire to be respected and recognized, legitimated, by
society, by the “Greek diner owners and Korean dry cleaners” in his neighborhood (who put up with gay men in part because they are the ones “buying gyros and bringing in Italian suits” [63]). Yet all of his attempts to normalize Rogelio in this way meet with failure. This is not necessarily because Rogelio is some queer superman who resists all normalization—quite the opposite. His panic at being identified as gay is what motivates him to “deny” Tommy repeatedly. Nonetheless, Tommy’s own obsession with Rogelio’s “denial” of him testifies to Tommy’s desire to normalize gayness into some kind of “homo-normativity.” Somewhat ironically, then, it is Tommy who insists on their relationship inhabiting a more normative version of family life than Rogelio is able or willing to inhabit with him.

Furthermore, Tommy is convinced that Rogelio actually is gay; Tommy’s worldview seems only to permit “gay” and “straight” as the readable categories. Tommy reports that Rogelio “tries” to be “nonchalant about [his tender gestures]” (54). Yet readers only receive Tommy’s interpretation of these encounters, so it is difficult to know whether Rogelio “tries” to act nonchalant (but fails) or whether he actually is nonchalant. Later, Tommy reveals that he often tries to talk to Rogelio about gay identity not “out of any particular political conviction” but because of the “absurdity” of “[Rogelio] pretending he’s so hyper-masculine when he’s scratching at [Tommy’s] door” (55). Tommy adds, “Personally, I think he knows better” (55). But knows better than what? Tommy reveals just before this statement that Rogelio is somewhat “transient” in spite of his wife and four “brown butterball” children—he is in the country thanks to a “dubious green-card” (54). Tommy glosses this fact quickly, as part of his friends’ opinion of Rogelio, but it is important to understanding Rogelio’s performance of his sexual
identity. Not only might he genuinely not see himself as gay, but his presence in the United States, his access to work, and his social networks might depend on his ability to “read” as straight. What Rogelio may “know better” than to do is perform a gender identity that could cost him his entire existence in the United States, and perhaps that of his wife and children.

The dark and somewhat hopeless ending forecloses the possibility of reunion between the men, even as its ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations (perhaps Tommy will “take” much more from Rogelio, and perhaps he won’t—Rogelio certainly seems set against identifying in any way as “gay,” even down to acknowledging Tommy as a lover in public in spite of his imminent death.) Further, it is not clear exactly what it is Tommy must “take” from Rogelio. Must Tommy “take” (seize) more of what Rogelio is unwilling to give, i.e., public displays of affection; or must Tommy “take” (endure) more rejection from Rogelio as a condition for them continuing to be together? Both readings are possible, and the story, in ending on this note, offers no definite answers.

Like “Above All, A Family Man,” “Forever” is ambivalent, at best, about the merits of familial connections, especially through race and ethnicity. The story is narrated by María, a 34-year-old Puerto Rican lesbian writer living in Chicago, who has been breaking up with one lover, Camila, for years, even though she has also been dating a 22-year-old Anglo woman, Sally, for at least a year (their anniversary passes during the time of the story). Though María has been in couples’ therapy with Camila for two years, she denies that she wants to get Camila back; she claims instead that she just wants answers, to know why “it” happened. Yet María also characterizes their relationship—or at least, its longevity—as doomed in some sense from the beginning. Early in the story, María
recalls a time when her mother declared that she couldn’t imagine herself as an old woman with anyone next to her on the porch but María’s father; in María’s recollection, María and Camila laugh nervously because they know that they do not picture each other in this way. In fact, as María declares repeatedly, she does not picture anybody in this way. However, though María’s feelings about Sally see-saw throughout the story, in the final sentences, as the train she’s riding turns a corner, María is able to picture herself as an old woman on a porch with Sally—a heteronormative framework she has borrowed from her mother. There are also two subplots that underline how María’s approach to relationships and love also foreclose her ability to empathize with friends.

María establishes early in the story that she does not want the usual kinds of relationships. She is a lesbian, but she defies the stereotype of a lesbian eager to get into a long-term relationship (the so-called “U-Haul lesbian”). In fact, she is skeptical about love in general:

Personally, I’d prefer to evolve beyond the concept of lovers, of couples, of love. The future is moot then; the future has no choice but to be now. It strikes me as the most revolutionary lesbian-feminist thing to do. Forget hunger, equality, environmentally correct garbage bags; let’s work to eliminate heartbreak instead. Love, coupledom, the right person—they’re as anachronistic and elusive as Puerto Rican independence: everybody’s for it, but no one’s quite sure what it means or how to get it. (97)

For María, living in the moment is only possible without love, because love is inevitably future-oriented; like the struggle to make Puerto Rico a free territory, the struggle to find the “right person” to love takes a certain faith in the future, a belief that such a state even exists and that it will make one’s existence better. This optimism María flatly rejects in favor of a more “evolved” present. She is right that this is one of the most revolutionary things to do, in the sense that political struggle assumes future dividends; one struggles to
change legislation and social norms that will be enjoyed perhaps by one’s own
generation, but that most of the real benefits accrue to future generation—one struggles
“for the children,” as it were. What is more revolutionary than to exempt oneself from the
liberal bourgeois political system altogether?

María’s desire to disengage from future-oriented relationships affects not only her
romantic partnerships but friendships and casual interactions as well. When they run into
each other in the State-to Dearborn train tunnel, her Mexican artist friend, Miguel, shows
María a Native American *siete potencias* featuring Native Americans instead of African
*orishas*. When María presses him about what he plans to do with it, though, he explains
that he might bring it to the Indian support group he’s been attending, though since he’s
new there, he’s afraid that they will think he’s making fun of them (102). “Miguel, what
are you doing in an Indian support group? You’re Mexican,” María says (102). He
replies, embarrassed, “Well, I’m both, really. I’m too *indio* to be Spanish and too Spanish
to be Indian. I’m fucked, that’s what I am. I’m completely fucked up” (102). Miguel feels
both damaged and doomed—both “fucked up” and “fucked.” María “wants to muster
some sympathy,” but she is interrupted in this endeavor when she catches sight of the
“Asian man” staring at them; it is her own paranoia that prevents her from supporting her
friend on his “journey” (102).

She dreads being recognized by people on the street and getting feedback on her
column, and when Rajeesh, the “Asian man,” hands her a piece of paper, she assumes it
is sinister and that he means her harm. She so sincerely believes this that when he hands
her another note later in the story, she attacks him, and they struggle. It is not until she
has been taken to the CTA transit police station to file a report about what they assume
was an attack on her (not by her) that an officer reads the note. In it, Rajeev explains how María’s column is an inspiration to him as a gay person of color, that she “understands” that minorities who come out “are really exchanging…one set of stereotypes for another” (109). This revelation, only two pages from the end of the story, completely changes María’s perspective, which until now has been paranoid, pessimistic, lonely, isolated. Though initially María’s views on love and relationships seem progressive and evolved, it becomes clear by the end of the story that María’s fear of the future, represented by her rejection of romantic partnership, is stifling to her and potentially harmful to others.

The trains she rides all over the city and the train stations where she boards and disembarks are not only the settings for her interactions with Rajeev and Miguel but also represent her fear of moving forward, collapsing the distinction between time and space. Throughout the story, she describes feelings of claustrophobia while riding the trains: she is “disoriented,” “sweaty,” “hot” (101); the train is “swinging out of control” and a “furnace on wheels” (105). Like her stance on relationships, forward movement makes María feel uneasy. Quite literally, then, María is afraid of moving forward; but after her interaction with Rajeev, in the last car she boards, she sits down in an almost empty, air-conditioned car. She thinks, again, “there is no right person, we will all love the wrong people, over and over and over” (111). Suddenly, as the train rounds a corner, she sees herself and Sally as old women on a porch, Sally “straddling” her rocker, “telling [her she’s] not going anywhere” (111). Like the ending of “Above All, A Family Man,” this ending withholds closure. It can be read as either a little menacing or affirming of their relationship; like the title, it refers both to a thing and its opposite; “forever” can mean
either the repeating cycle of relationships or the length of the “ideal” relationship. Instead of living in and for the present—the “no future” of Lee Edelman’s “queer death drive” that Tommy and Rogelio inhabit—this story seems to cast doubt on such a mode of life. Instead, María’s resistance to the futurity of relationships sickens and disorients her; like riding a hot El train, time sweeps her forward whether she is ready to go or not. The ending here promises closure, even if such closure is undesirable, undermining the one-note conclusion of “Above All, A Family Man” that seems to support Edelman’s and others’ queer antirelational stance. Instead, this story may have more in common, ideologically, with José E. Muñoz’s idea of queerness as “always on the horizon” (Muñoz 11). Like Muñoz, María resists “the devastating logic of the here and now” that “naturalizes…capitalism and heteronormativity,” but she does not catch a glimpse of any kind of queer utopianism—queerness “on the horizon”—until the very end of the story, where she is able to relax in an air-conditioned, peaceful train car taking her back to her lover, Sally (Muñoz 12). “Forever” and “Above All,” taken together, trouble any easy ideas about what queerness must look like—even queer family.

In a much shorter story, “The Spouse,” Lupe, a Mexican-American lesbian living in Chicago, and Raul, a Mexican immigrant who works as a dishwasher in a Chicago diner, argue with each other over the meaning of family and in the process explore the limits of intersectional alliances. Lupe has married Raul so that he can stay in the country; in exchange, Raul paid Lupe an unspecified sum of money that she used to buy a house with her lover, Kate (Obejas 90). The conversation begins when Raul catches sight of Lupe in his diner and follows her out to try to convince her to spend time with him and his family as his wife. Lupe strenuously refuses this proposal, and Raul just as
strenuously insists that she should accept it. Lupe asserts that she and Raul are “not family, no matter how many justices of the peace [they] stand in front of” (85). Raul counters that of course they are, and then tells Lupe that she needs him in order to stay in touch with her “Latin self,” which includes “[remembering] feelings…[and] passion” and thinking about “motherhood…music…[and] poetry” (86). For Lupe, family is exclusively a chosen circle of people, including, presumably, her girlfriend, but excluding Raul, her “business” partner. For Raul, on the other hand, “family” immediately evokes not only marriage but nationality; it is Lupe’s mexicanidad that Raul wants to help her recover, as her husband.

Though Lupe scoffs at the “pile of stereotypes” Raul lists as part of a “Latin self,” Raul himself defies one of the most salient stereotypes about Latino men: that they are unrepentant womanizers. Raul actually cries as he admits to Lupe that he has finally given in and “cheated” on her with another woman, since she refuses to fulfill her conjugal duties. Lupe is, of course, not at all upset about Raul’s “cheating,” and gently encourages Raul to “get out and get involved” (88). In response, he wails, “Why did I have to marry such a cold woman?” to which Lupe replies, “[Y]ou didn’t marry a cold woman; you married a lesbian” (89). Raul, however, refuses to hear this, covering his ears and shouting “No!” The police have been called by two “young and girlish” male bystanders who were watching the couple fight, and so the story ends with all of them (Raul, Lupe, and the two bystanders) wandering away, and a squad car pulling up to find that “nobody was there” (90). In this story, Lupe’s act of racial solidarity, her defiance of the State’s cruel immigration laws, ends up directly conflicting with her free expression of her sexuality. Though the police, representatives of the State, are called, all parties
know better than to wait around and involve themselves in the enforcement of law and order. Lupe’s difficulty convincing Raul that they are only “legally” married, not “really” married echoes the heteronormative view that conflates “legal” and “real” states of being, and succinctly illustrates the thorny and complex issues at play in reworking the politics of family (88-89, emphasis in original).

Finally, in the title story, “We Came All the Way to Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?” Obejas brings the spotlight to a literal nuclear, Cuban family, directly tying the preceding stories that, as I have shown in the examples above, illustrate the ambivalent legacy of rejecting the family ideal to the historical context of the Cuban revolution. The story takes place in the present tense of the family’s arrival in Miami shortly after the revolution, but projects into the future to describe not only this time, but the author’s teenage and college years into her adulthood (and even, apparently, past her own death, since she reveals that her mother will “outlive” her). The narrator is an only child whose parents make the dangerous crossing with her to Florida when she is six years old. From the beginning, her father repeats to everyone that they have come “for her,” so that she might have a better life. The narrator, as a lesbian, must contemplate what life would have been like had they never left, had there been no revolution, had she never had any blond lovers; yet she also resists her father’s characterization of his reasons for fleeing, knowing that he had self-interested motivations, as well. After describing her father’s death in 1990 and her mother’s small renaissance, the story ends with the family back in their first American hotel room after their journey from Cuba, observing with amusement something happening on the street below them. “[E]ven I know we’ve
already come a long way. What none of us can measure yet is how much of the voyage is already behind us,” she says (131).

The narrator’s lesbian identity and the wrinkles that this puts in her relationship with her parents are as much a part of their family dynamics as is their status as refugees from Fidel’s Cuba. That is, the fact that the narrator is a lesbian makes her relationship to her homeland more fraught. She rejects her father’s claims that they came to Cuba solely for her benefit (and that she therefore “owes” them normative behavior), telling him, “Look, you didn’t come for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to end up a cashier in your father’s hardware store if you didn’t leave, okay?” (121); nonetheless, she must wonder, “What if we’d stayed? What if we’d never left Cuba?...I wonder, if we’d stayed then who, if anyone…would have been my blond lovers, or any kind of lovers at all?” (124-125). Later, after making love to a “Cuban…exile writer of some repute,” she will wonder again “if it would have happened at all if we’d stayed in Cuba” (126). Here, the fact of the revolution and her family’s exile has enabled her to live as a lesbian in a way that she fears would not have been possible had they stayed in Cuba—and yet her life, because they left, is overdetermined, fraught with the significance that her father projects onto her.

That the entire story takes place, temporally, when the narrator is six years old, that everything—adolescence, lovers, career, death—take place as a projection into the future emphasizes the queer futurity of this story. Sara Cooper argues that this temporal shifting is part of the queerness of the story, that it is “as queer (or postmodern) as any
elements of theme or plot” (83). In light of the rest of the stories in the collection that are so focused on time, heteronormativity, and futurity, as I have shown, the “queerness” of this narrative device is especially significant. Rather than a grown woman narrating her life from her deathbed, remembering a particular moment (arriving in the United States) as the focal point for everything that would follow, the story narrates from that focal moment. Deferring the certainty of time of death (one’s own or one’s parents), the story’s narrator resists a future that conforms to anyone’s expectations; she does not marry a North American man, as her mother hopes; she does not become a lawyer, as her father hopes; she refuses to change out of the green sweater she crossed the ocean wearing, as the Catholic volunteers hope. Instead, the story forces readers to inhabit the moment where some possibilities have opened and others have closed, where any future freedom or autonomy is still a projection into future time. Like “Above All, A Family Man,” “Forever,” and “The Spouse,” “We Came All The Way” ends in a way that suggests both possibility and its opposite, a queer futurity that is completely contingent on factors beyond anyone’s control.

**Conclusion**

We will not escape the nation-as-family metaphor any time soon. Like most metaphors with lasting power, it contains an idea that strikes powerfully close to what we believe most deeply about ourselves. It is also, not coincidentally, a stereotype and a “box” that can limit thinking as well as provide doors into new viewpoints. It appeals to our basest emotions (family is most important, and all others should be shut out) as well.  

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14 Cooper seems to equate postmodernist narrative strategies with queer narrative strategies here. While both concepts can sustain discussion of fragmentation and non-linearity (the two formal qualities Cooper cites), queerness seems to me to be focused primarily around the idea of fragmenting a gender narrative, or disrupting a linear heteronormative trajectory.
as our best (that stranger is my sister, so she is imbued with the same human dignity that I am). When a metaphor is so ingrained that it goes without saying, then the tweaking of that metaphor becomes a fertile site of cultural production. This is the case with both Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters* and Achy Obejas’ *We Came All The Way*, as I have shown above. Obejas, in particular, queers the entire notion of family in a way that García only hints at. If García challenges the nation-as-family trope by showing how, in a single family, it breaks down, Obejas does that and then some, showing not only the fissures in and failures of heteronormative family, but the possibilities and pitfalls of queer family, as well. Both texts show that when “family” is reimagined in the wake of a violent rupture, like the Cuban revolution, then different and potentially more liberatory models of family can be imagined.

Yet it is important to emphasize “potentially.” As I have also shown above, the breaking of oppressive tropes does not necessarily mean that more freeing metaphors or structures will replace them. *The Agüero Sisters* and *We Came All The Way* both complicate patriarchal heteronormative, Euro-centric discourses of the family, but they do not provide templates for utopic enactment of alternatives. Instead, they leave questions about the future unanswered, gesturing instead at possibilities and locating hope, as Muñoz does, in the future, on a horizon we may never reach but can always perceive.
CHAPTER THREE

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND THE DISRUPTION OF PATRIARCHY IN

JUNOT DÍAZ’S THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO AND

ANA CASTILLO’S SO FAR FROM GOD

Q: What about our monster, Trujillo? I have heard you say that we’re all Trujillo’s kids…

A: The evil of the father lasts. The consequences of those kinds of patriarchal traumas last to the point where the person no longer has contact with the origins of that evil.

–Junot Díaz in an interview with Juleyka Lantigua-Williams in The Progressive

Although Ana Castillo’s So Far from God and Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao are very different novels in many respects, they share an orientation towards the reader and towards narration and storytelling that is worth examining.

Despite their different cultural and historical underpinnings, they illustrate a specifically Latina/o feminist resistance to patriarchal norms and, in the case of Oscar Wao especially, a deeper interrogation of Latino masculinity than caricatures of the macho typically allow. This interrogation is achieved formally in two ways. First, in spite of their sometimes-dark subject matter, chatty, funny, self-reflexive, non-omniscient narrators dominate both novels. Second, both novels deploy the epic family saga, as opposed to a bildungsroman,¹ as a scaffolding device to tell their stories. The epic family

¹ Oscar Wao, in particular, is sometimes shuttled into bildungsroman territory by reviewers and publicists, who want to see it either as the story of the titular character, or as “really” about Yunior and what he learns about himself in the process of his friendship with Oscar and relationship with Lola. Both of these are convenient ways to summarize the novel, but they do not accurately reflect its genre.
saga, in these cases at least, functions as a way to address multiple identities within a single frame without being restricted to one character’s consciousness, point of view, or social circle. In all family saga novels, rather than one character’s perspective looking out, readers get several different perspectives and are able follow different story lines that are not necessarily directly related to all of the main characters. While the content of both novels seems to undermine heteropatriarchy, only So Far from God employs a narrative form that resists locating authority in one place. Nonetheless, reading these two novels next to each other helps illuminate the ways that each resists heteropatriarchal norms.

In So Far from God, the narrator is familiar with the townspeople and their gossip, commenting on their foibles and going into what seem like long tangents about side characters, but she does not directly interact with the characters. In Oscar Wao, meanwhile, the narrator eventually reveals himself to be a character in the narrative. Although the narrator in So Far from God is far less self-conscious than the narrator in Oscar Wao, both of them call attention to the narration of the story as a factor in readers’ interpretation of events. While Oscar Wao’s narrator, Yunior, builds a centrally focused web of connection, using himself as a focal point, So Far from God’s narrational connections end up looking more like a connect-the-dots game (as the narrator herself refers to the narrative at one point), or a network of different connections and alliances that does not focus around or on any one character (Fig. 1).

2 The gender of the narrator is not specified explicitly, although one could make an argument from circumstantial and implicit evidence that the narrator is female; for ease of reading, I will refer to “she” for So Far from God’s narrator.
Figure 1. Narrative relationships in *Oscar Wao* and *So Far from God*.

All narratives in *Oscar Wao* come back to Yunior; no character exists outside of his consciousness, not even Lola, whose narratee is Yunior himself. In *So Far from God*, by contrast, the narrator’s mediation is less obvious, and less anxious. This is clear in the ways that relationships between characters seem to exist outside of her purview; in contrast, even before he is a character in the narrative, Yunior cannot help but insert his own opinions. *So Far from God’s* narrator, however, simply offers up the opinions of the characters, and very occasionally, her own.

Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez write in *The Latino/a Literary Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* of three “camps” in Latino/a literary criticism: the universalists, who emphasize the over-arching universal themes of Latino/a
literature; the multiculturalist academics, who emphasize the linguistic challenge that Latino/a literature represents to the mainstream rather than emphasizing its themes of community and social justice (Ilan Stavans is representative of this "infiltration rather than opposition" model, according to Dalleo and Machado [5-6]); and the anticolonialists, who decry post-60s Latino/a literature as apolitical in part because their model of “political” writing is that of writers like Piri Thomas, generally disagreeing with the multicultural critics (Dalleo and Machado cite Juan Flores as a representative example of this camp). As Machado and Dalleo go on to argue, however, distinguishing themselves from all three of these “camps,” the concerns of contemporary Latina/o authors reflect the more complex identity of “Latino” in the late 20th and early 21st century:

[The] value [of post-60s Latino/a literature] lies in offering something crucial to our postcolonial, post-Civil Rights era…Contemporary writers offer new ways of understanding postcoloniality, and in so doing can move us past a potentially pessimistic or backward-looking politics that can only lament the end of an era of possibility, toward hope for a renewed political Latino/a literature able to speak confidently in the public sphere. (11)

These “new ways of understanding postcoloniality” often go hand-in-hand with innovative or unusual narrators and narrative structures. While certainly not the first novelists to experiment with narrative voice and structure, Castillo and Díaz, in my view, are notable in that they self-consciously write as Latinos and about Latinos in a time when the field of Latino/a Studies is gaining momentum and recognition both within the academy and outside of it. Further, both of these novels explicitly concern themselves with the family as a way of organizing community and the nation.

The notion that narratological choices affect the political import of a text is not a new one, but critics differ over exactly how or in which ways those choices do their
ideological work. Further, the narrator’s (or even the author’s) apparent intentions in constructing a narrative in a particular way are not always borne out, emphasizing the complicated nature of identity and representation in literature. In Oscar Wao, for example, though the narrator, Yunior, struggles to escape the authority of being the only voice speaking, and is critical of the patriarchal system he describes, he is also firmly entrenched in that system in his personal life, as he hints in the first half of the novel and as he makes explicit later. Nor can Yunior imagine a concrete alternative to patriarchy; as scholars have noted, though Yunior undercuts Trujillo and relegates him to “minor character” status, he is ultimately part of the very system of masculinity for which Trujillo becomes a metonym (Harford Vargas; Jay). Therefore the novel’s feminist message, if one exists, is implicit: don’t be like Yunior. So Far from God, on the other hand, has more in common with utopian feminist novels than with the apocalyptic science fiction and comics that Oscar Wao alludes to so frequently. The narrator of So Far imagines a world where men do not always dominate women, offering models of local, egalitarian community engagement while simultaneously rewriting misogynist scripts about stereotypes like “the slut,” “the abandoned woman,” “the career woman,” “the single mother,” and “the deadbeat dad.” Juxtaposing these two novels sheds light on the interconnected workings of patriarchy and narrative, as well as illustrating how such nontraditional narratives can disrupt norms of family that are restrictive or oppressive. I use the word “disruption,” rather than “resistance” or “subversion” deliberately; because

José Muñoz, in Cruising Utopia, says, “I am…not interested in a notion of the radical that merely connotes some notion of extremity, righteousness, or affirmation of newness. My investment in utopia and hope is my response to queer thinking that embraces a politics of the here and now that is underlined by what I consider to be today’s hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda” (10). This seems to me particularly relevant to the projects of disruption I see at work in these novels, projects that are also expressions of hope and (re)construction.
“family” is such a complex matrix through which to view identity and relationships, disruption is perhaps the best we can hope for. Narratology, in its focus on structures, patterns, and systems of organization, provides a framework through which to monitor such disruption by attending to the way narrators conform (or not) to the standards of authoritative (Anglo) narrators. Because the Western literary world has taken the white, straight, middle-class male as its yardstick for so much of its history, I extrapolate that critics may take the narratological norms of the 19th and 20th century as expressive of a certain Western male sensibility, following narratologists like Susan Lanser, among others. Thus, throughout this chapter, I will refer to “traditional narratives” and “traditional narrators,” by which I mean those narrators and narratives that define themselves against a white, middle-class, heterosexual, and/or male framework and that follow a linear, empirically-oriented, and/or omniscient narrative arc.

**Patriarchy and Narratology**

While the greater part of literary studies in the past 50 years, at least, has attempted to describe the relationship between form and meaning in texts, at first glance, the connection between the political import and the formal construction of novels may not be clear. What difference does it make what kind of narrator readers are presented with, after all? Gérard Genette’s system of formal classification for narratives, developed in *Narrative Discourse*, is a useful starting point for this discussion of the importance of form, because it provides a precise way to describe narrators and their various activities. For Genette, the common distinctions between narrators (third or first person; omniscient or limited; reliable or unreliable) are merely starting points for analysis of narrative. Genette classifies narrators as “heterodiegetic,” indicating a narrator who is not part of
the story (the classic “third person” narrator); “homodiegetic,” indicating a narrator who is part of the story; and “autodiegetic,” where the narrator has a “starring” role (Genette 244-245). In addition, Genette outlines several different narrative levels to indicate “where” a particular aspect of a story is taking place. These are: extradiegetic (any narrative act occurring outside the level of the main narrative); diegetic (the level of the story world itself); intradiegetic (on the diegetic level, but narrated to another character); and metadiegetic (any embedded narrative within the diegesis) (Genette 228). “Metalepsis,” in Genette’s system, describes any “breach” between levels, when a narrator intrudes on another narrating situation (235). “The most troubling thing,” Genette says, “about metalepses indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic” and that we ourselves might “belong to some narrative” (236). (Indeed, the discussion of Oscar Wao below will support this claim.) Finally, Genette’s discussion of the three levels of focalization—zero (that is, traditional “omniscient” narrating), internal (narration from the perspective of the focal character), and external (narration that sees characters from “the outside”)—is helpful in pinpointing exactly what kind of activity a narrator is engaged in.

Of course, as exhaustive as Genette’s categorizations seem, they do not address every concern raised by a consideration of narrators in relation to texts and authors, as Susan S. Lanser points out in her 1986 essay, “Towards a Feminist Narratology.” Lanser adds the consideration of “public” and “private” to Genette’s system, expanding extra-, intra- and metadiegetic, hetero- and homodiegetic categories to include consideration of whether the narratee is public (as in a public readership, whether this is implicit or explicit) or private (as in letters) (Lanser 684-685). The addition of these categories helps
Lanser to bridge the divide between the formal consideration of narratology and the political and social considerations that feminist readings impart. Lanser quickly acknowledges that “other oppressed peoples” besides women need a narratology that accounts for the role of ideology and marginal voices (682). In my opinion, this is especially true in fields like Latina/o literature, where critics can seem to divide along semiotically- or mimetically-oriented lines, and where heterogeneous historical and sociological understandings of the term “Latina/o” are integral for understanding the existence of the field in the first place. Therefore, when Díaz and Castillo employ unusual narrators (in so far as they do not conform to third-person, omniscient, linear narrative models) in their novels, this formal concern should be part of the consideration of the political orientations of the novels, as Dalleo and Machado argue more broadly in their book.

Particularly in Latina/o literature, existing as it does at the intersection not only of various nationalities, languages, and ethnicities, but also of various critical discourses (postcolonialism, transnationalism, ethnic studies, Latin American, U.S., and European literatures), polyphony is doubly relevant. Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” focuses on ideology and dialogism and argues that the novel, unlike poetry, is a heteroglot production. That is to say, what is unique about novels, according to Bakhtin, is their combination of “languages,” or voices; heteroglossia is “another’s speech in another’s language” (324, emphasis in original). For Bakhtin, “heteroglot waves” can exist in a single text—words can be quoted from someone else, and also be the words of the author or another character. “[O]ne and the same word often figures both as the speech of the author and as the speech of another—at the same time,” Bakhtin says (308).
This is related to the idea of “character zones,” where characters’ words and judgments bleed into one another. One implication of these insights is that authors may intend things for their characters’ pronouncements that they may not have total control over, since they are imitating another “class” dialect or language. More importantly, however, Bakhtin’s insights imply that critical consideration of novelistic form requires attention to the history, politics, and sociology of its production. As Bakhtin says, “the internal social dialogism of novelistic discourse requires the concrete social context of discourse to be exposed, to be revealed as a force that determines its entire stylistic structure, its form and content” (300). For Bakhtin, authors—and therefore narrators and characters, who refract authors’ intentions—are never outside of ideology. The implications of these insights extend even to autodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators, who, far from being objective, relate narratives shaped by the sociocultural contexts in which they operate. While many critics have pointed out the fact that Yunior takes part in the masculinity that he criticizes, very few have examined how this ideological commitment of his affects how he tells his story.

Because *Oscar Wao* foregrounds the process of its own production in the story, positions its narrator as its author and as a character, and focuses attention on historical trauma, injustice, racism, and sexism, the foregoing theories and methodologies are helpful in analyzing exactly how the narrative form affects the social, political, and historical content of the novel. In one sense, Yunior’s relationship to the text of *Oscar Wao* dramatizes Bakhtin’s theories about heteroglossia. All of the major narratives in the novel, with the notable exception of Lola’s, are filtered through and authored by Yunior, making his voice, his ideology, the main one with which the characters are in dialogue,
and though Yunior does not narrate Lola’s sections, he is the narratee of them, as mentioned above. Thus, though all of these characters are ostensibly speaking with their own voices, they are also expressing the intentions of the author/narrator—that is, Yunior’s.

My approach to these novels blends these various methodologies and lines of inquiry about narrative and tone to explain how I see their formal qualities working to undermine heteropatriarchy (even if, as is the case in much of Oscar Wao, they also shore it up). Specifically, I aim to illuminate how novels concerned very specifically with Latina/o social surroundings unsettle norms of culture through unsettling norms of authority in fiction. My argument that patriarchy is fundamentally a familial relationship and that the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality usually begins in the family requires attention to the relationships of sexuality and queerness that I discuss along with form in the following paragraphs. (Indeed, my work rests on the premise that sexuality, gender, and race are inseparable from our notions of the family and that family structures identity as much as these more common categories.) Thus, writing a feminist narrative in the context of this kind of patriarchy entails resisting the singular, authoritative voice of the patriarch, in this case by unseating the primacy of male domination in a narrative, as both Oscar Wao and So Far from God do.

As Genette says of narrators, “Absence is absolute, but presence has degrees” (245). Oscar Wao and So Far from God play with narrators who end up showing in very different ways the radical possibilities of narrative structure for interpreting a story, as well as the difference “degrees of absence” can make. Oscar Wao’s narrator is somewhat unusual in that, unlike other famous unreliable male narrators, like, say, Holden Caulfield
or Alex Portnoy, Yunior’s narrative voice is slangy and irreverent but also deeply invested in empiricism and history. He frames the colonization of the New World as an enduring fukú, yet he also spends considerable time, particularly in the first third of the novel, on historical footnotes and explanations of sources. While he at first seems to be a heterodiegetic narrator, by Chapter 4 (and perhaps earlier), he has emerged onto the scene as an autodiegetic narrator. After that point, he largely gives up the project of documenting “history” and moves into more speculative explanations for events, suggesting that there is a link between his heterodiegetic mode and a sort of drive for empirical evidence characteristic of traditional histories. In So Far from God, by contrast, the narrator spends no time justifying her authority or documenting sources, but launches immediately into her gossipy, relational mode. While she knows things about the characters that she could not possibly know if she were a character in those particular scenes, when she is not focalizing through various characters, most of her knowledge is of the sort that a long-time resident of Tome might know. By both shaping the story and freely giving it over to her characters (without, as Yunior does, calling attention to the fact that she is shaping a story from fragments), the narrator in So Far from God reformulates what counts as “realistic” and “empirical” evidence. Like much feminist and postmodern literature, by disobeying the “rules” of narrative, both novels call attention to the constructedness of the way we see and tell history, and the stakes of such tellings are particularly high when we are talking about Latina/o literature and history. To speak about the formal qualities of both of these novels is interesting enough on its own, but

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4 Lola first mentions “you,” i.e., Yunior, during Chapter 2, her first section of narration: “Wildwood: 1982-1985.” However, this section begins with an extended italicized portion where somebody, presumably Yunior, focalizes through young Lola before allowing her to narrate.
adding to this discussion questions of race, sex, and especially family reveals how family can be reimagined when patriarchal authority is not the only game in town.

**Narrative, History, and Gender in Oscar Wao**

Junot Díaz’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, popular with literary critics and “laypeople” alike, explores the consequences of colonization and dictatorship in the lives of a Dominican American family. Unsurprisingly, then, many of the critical articles about *Oscar Wao* approach the novel through the lens of postcolonialism or critical race theory. Monica Hanna, in “‘Reassembling the Fragments’: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,*” argues that Yunior, the narrator, crafts an alternative historiography than the “official” one endorsed by the powers that be; to accomplish this task, he adopts a “hybrid narrative model [that] reflects [the novel’s] focus on diasporic characters” (Hanna 498-499). Hanna’s focus is not on the specific formal qualities of Yunior’s narration, however, but rather on the way he draws attention to the “páginas en blanco,” thereby subverting official histories that purport to tell a coherent, unitary history. Many critics focus on the politics of dictatorship and masculinity in the novel, including Daynali Flores-Rodriguez, Sandra Cox, Paul Jay, Elena Machado Sáez, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and Katherine Weese. Whatever the

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5 Ashley Kunsa, in her article, “History, Hair, and Reimagining Racial Categories in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Like of Oscar Wao,*” reads the novel through its depictions of racialization (specifically hair) and the histories of both the Dominican Republic and Haiti to argue that *Oscar Wao* subverts the black/white racial binary of the United States. Ignacio López-Calvo argues for *Oscar Wao’s* debt to magical realist Latin American writers in “A Postmodern Plátano’s Trujillo: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* More Macondo than McOndo,” while José David Saldívar uses the novel’s preoccupation with the fukú as a jumping-off point for thinking about the Americas more generally in “Conjectures on ‘Americanity’ and Junot Díaz’s ‘Fukú Americanus’ in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.*”
approach, however, it is impossible to ignore the legacy of colonization and
domination—gendered, racialized, and classed—in the lives of the characters. Even
(even especially) in a formal analysis, then, establishing the narrative’s connection to Trujillo
(and, as the first pages remind us, the entire history of Conquest and colonization of the
Americas) is necessary.

If *Oscar Wao* is a book about Trujillo, it is also a book about norms of
masculinity and the role of the state in our lives, and the possibility of recovering from
historical trauma (not just from a dictatorship, but from the entire civilizing project of
colonization and modernization). One of the main issues *Oscar Wao* raises is that of the
possibility of love after trauma. As the epigraph opening this chapter suggests,
“patriarchal trauma…lasts”; colonialism is, therefore, intimately connected to everyday
life. In terms of nationalism and leadership, if the nation is figured as a huge family, then
the *entire country* constitutes the leader’s “children.” (Indeed, the roots of the words
“patriotic” and “patria” suggest the connection: from Latin *pater* or the root *patr-* , having
to do with the father.) Thus the leader of the nation, in order to be a good patriarch,
cannot tolerate any other competition for control of the “family.” Authorship, too,
means inherently to possess authority; it is the author’s right to decide what happens to

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6 Yunior mentions the ambivalent legacy of colonization and modernization in an early footnote
where he lists Trujillo’s many atrocities and ends with the acknowledgement that, in spite of all
of that unequivocally evil activity, Trujillo also “forged the Dominican peoples into a modern
state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do)” (Díaz 3, fn. 1).
The double-edged sword of modernization, including medicine and education, has historically
been that it comes with a high price tag, often demolishing indigenous ways of life in its wake.

7 Trujillo’s nickname, “El Jefe,” means literally “the boss” but can also be applied in familial
contexts to refer to the patriarch. This overlap is not incidental; one’s father, in a patriarchal
system, *is* one’s *jefe*. Yunior tells us in the same footnote that the motto of the country was
“tellingly…‘Dios y Trujillo’” (2, fn. 1), further solidifying Trujillo’s status as a “father” to the
pueblo: God is the spiritual father, and Trujillo is the earthly father.
his narrative, to control it, in the same way that a patriarch is supposed to be the source of authority in the family. Díaz has acknowledged this dynamic repeatedly. In his interview with Paul Jay, Díaz speaks about the connection between masculinity and narrative, linking a dominating “pater familias” masculinity and the desire to be “the only voice speaking” (Interview 5). Although Yunior is trying to atone for the masculinity he embodies through giving voice to Oscar’s story, “unfortunately, he’s doing it in the exact same way that the masculinity he’s trying to undermine has always perpetuated itself…” Díaz points out (Jay 5). (Here it may be useful to note that Yunior is the writer of the novel, even though Díaz is also its author—in “reality,” Díaz is the author, but in both the metadiegetic and intradiegetic worlds of the book, Yunior himself is composing the novel we read.) Oscar Wao itself nods to the connection between “Dictators and Writers” in footnote 11, where Yunior muses on both as “natural antagonists” (Díaz 97).  

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8 Because a nation is an “imagined community” (Anderson), and because that primal story of the nation connects two people who are otherwise total strangers, it is a good analogy for family, which also connects people irrevocably whether they like it or not. Therefore the organizing categorizations “family” and “diaspora” are thematically linked, and their enforcement follows similar models, if different scales; while a single patriarch may suffice to subdue a wayward child or wife, an entire state-sanctioned apparatus is required to police a nation under an authoritarian “patriarch.” As Elena Machado Sáez points out, the Derek Walcott epigraph that opens Oscar Wao refers us back to diaspora studies, where “diaspora” and “nation” are opposed to each other (like the binary Walcott sets up in his poem: “nobody” or “a nation”). Machado claims that Oscar Wao “challenges the academic formulation of diaspora” because Yunior and Oscar struggle to fit themselves into an “authentic” Dominican identity (525). “[E]ven within the diaspora a silencing can occur,” Machado argues, “because the diaspora is also conditioned by the logic of the nation….In effect, Yunior’s relationship to Oscar is not one of solidarity but of competing diasporic identities” (525). She goes on, “Oscar Wao is a transnational text that blurs the opposition between diaspora and nation by making clear that for U.S.-born Oscar to be a diasporic subject, he must be domesticated according to the code of nationalist belonging, as enforced by the Dominican Republic-born Yunior” (526). Machado then links family and diaspora to normative sexuality—never far behind normative visions of the two-parent family. In her reading, Yunior desires Oscar—the queer character whose queerness is never directly addressed, though evidence of it is offered left and right. Thus, Yunior’s narrational antics serve at least in part to weave together the themes of family, cultural identity, diasporic identity, and sexuality.
As Díaz himself points out in this interview, Yunior is reproducing the dictator masculinity by being “the only voice speaking.” Yet some critics argue that Yunior is still able to subvert the patriarchy through various narrational moves. For example, Jennifer Harford Vargas, in her article “Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form in Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” argues that the structure of the novel mitigates the force of Yunior’s “dictating”; because “the uneven distributing of characters and perspectives in a novel can be analyzed as a system of power hierarchies,” Vargas argues, Oscar Wao resists Trujillo’s dominance by relegating him to “minor character” status. Unlike Vargas Llosa’s The Feast of the Goat or García Márquez’s The Autumn of the Patriarch, for example, Oscar Wao denies Trujillo any subjectivity in the narrative; Trujillo is “an overwhelmingly absent presence” in Oscar Wao (11, 12). She situates Latin American and especially Caribbean dictatorship in a “five-hundred year transamerican saga” that began, as Oscar Wao acknowledges, with the enslavement of Africans brought to the New World, undermining the idea that with the fall of the dictator comes freedom (15). In this context, Harford Vargas reads Yunior’s refusal to end the novel conventionally as his own way of resisting the role of dictator. Yunior is “far from an objective observer in the positivist sense, far from omniscient in the narratorial sense, and far from panoptic in the disciplinarian and authoritarian sense,” Harford Vargas claims (23). While Yunior is a minor dictator who is incredibly self-conscious about the power he wields and tries to undermine the system in which he participates, I contend that Yunior is, in fact, panoptic, omniscient, and objective—or at least, he wants readers to think that he is in the first third of the novel. This desire on Yunior’s part is expressed by his attempts to shore up his narrative with
“facts” and historical data, which he does in the footnotes as well as in the body of the text itself. Of the 21 footnotes in Chapters 1-3, only 2 are references to science fiction or fantasy: footnote 3 (5), a quotation from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Tale of the Children of Húrin* or possibly *The Words of Húrin and Morgoth*, and footnote 20 (156), a quotation from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

Katherine Weese gets around the critical problem of Yunior’s unsavory sexism by linking the constructedness of narrative and gender in her article “‘Tú No Eres Nada de Dominicano’: Unnatural Narration and De-Naturalizing Gender Constructs in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” Weese argues that Yunior’s narration, rather than being complicit with the norms of dictator masculinity it describes, actually calls attention to their constructedness by calling attention to the constructedness of the narrative. Particularly because Yunior at first positions himself as heterodiegetic while using the first-person designation, Weese contends, his narrational stance is “unnatural” because he knows things about the characters that he, as a character, could not possibly know. She argues that the increasing claims about the limits of knowledge and “the páginas en blanco” as the novel progresses are signs that Yunior is actually challenging “the hegemony he once seemed to embrace” (102).

I agree with the general outlines of this argument, but I insist that paying attention to the details of Yunior’s narratorial acrobatics reveals a less sympathetic Yunior than many of us would like to admit. For example, after Yunior’s autodiegetic narration in Chapter 4, which shows him being petty and cruel not only to Oscar, but also to every single woman with whom he is romantically involved, the jig is up, in a sense; Yunior

9 Of the 21 footnotes in Chapters 1-3, only 2 are references to science fiction or fantasy: footnote 3 (5), a quotation from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Tale of the Children of Húrin* or possibly *The Words of Húrin and Morgoth*, and footnote 20 (156), a quotation from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. 
cannot realistically return to the heterodiegetic stance he enjoyed before without disavowing the college-age Yunior of Chapter 4. As Machado points out, in the second half of the novel, he begins to give up more traditional narrative control, using fewer footnotes and historical facts to underpin his narration and proposing multiple explanations and endings, supporting the idea that after the entrance of “autodiegetic Yunior,” the heterodiegetic stance of Chapters 1-3 becomes unsustainable. Further, unlike Weese, I do not think that the novel necessarily shows that “the Yunior who narrates…has undergone some real changes as a result of his involvement with the Cabral/De León family” (92-93). Though he is certainly wistful about his failed relationship with Lola, his narration of the Belicia section (Chapter 3), which occurs after his “involvement” with the family is more or less over, is problematic. If anything, the Yunior who narrates “from some point in the future after Oscar’s death” is more affected by his own narrational antics than by his interactions with Oscar and Lola, as he self-consciously tries to anticipate the readers’ reactions to his story; “Look, he’s writing Suburban Tropical now,” he comments in a sub-section titled “A Note From Your Author,” in mimcry of readers who find the depiction of Ybón “not believable” (284).

Yunior consistently signals, even in the first chapters, that he is not to be completely trusted. However, it is usually only in retrospect that these signals can be apprehended. As I have already mentioned, the narrator positions himself as a heterodiegetic, if slangy, storyteller from the outset of the novel. He knows things about

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10 He comes close but does not ever quite manage to convey a sense that he has moved beyond the womanizing and macho posturing of his youth, with the notable exception of this passage, which stands typographically alone in the narrative: “These days I have to ask myself: What made me angrier? That Oscar, the fat loser, quit, or that Oscar, the fat loser, defied me? And I wonder: What hurt him more? That I was never really his friend, or that I pretended to be?” (181).
Oscar’s early life that a character interacting with the family members could not possibly know, focalizing through Oscar as a boy and young man, and therefore leading the reader to assume that he is a heterodiegetic narrator. The section of the novel where the reader learns who The Gangster’s wife is and how the Gangster really achieved his success the narrator subtitles “Truth and Consequences 2,” highlighting the “realness” of this information as opposed to the lies and half-truths that the Gangster spins for Beli in the love motels, implying that there is a bedrock level of narratorial “truth” that the narrator is presenting to readers. Readers will later learn that almost the entire story is Yunior’s invention, but because they don’t know any better yet, statements of fact and “truth” can be taken at face value.

In Chapter 3, Yunior pulls a bait-and-switch maneuver during his telling of the Gangster’s story that, in retrospect, is a warning to readers not to trust his authority. He first describes the Gangster as a self-made man, someone who saw an opportunity and created a life for himself—the Gangster seems to be, as Beli says admiringly, “free” (134). However, the narrator then reveals a few pages later that even the Gangster is connected to Trujillo by the obligation of patriarchal ties. “The Gangster’s wife was—drumroll please—Trujillo’s fucking sister!” he explains. “Did you really think some street punk from Samaná was going to reach the upper echelons of the Trujillato on hard work alone? Negro, please—this ain’t a fucking comic book!” he exclaims (138). The revelation of the Gangster’s nepotistic success comes as a shock, undermining the “freedom” the Gangster supposedly possesses. Yunior—even before he exists as

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The dig at comic books is, of course, somewhat tongue-in-cheek. First of all, one expects this phrase to be “this ain’t a fucking fairy tale,” raising the question of the difference between the two genres in the first place, and whether comic books, like fairy tales, have happy or predictable endings, or characters who act in predictable ways.
Yunior—signal to readers subtly that he is not to be trusted, even as this bait-and-switch strategy heightens the drama of the story.

Yunior’s narration about the Gangster shows very clearly that Yunior cannot give up the masculinity that he is also self-aware enough to critique. In spite of the Gangster’s shadiness (which Yunior points out to us in examples like the one above), Yunior clearly respects him. This respect is nowhere clearer, and therefore more jarring, than in a paragraph that begins with an apparent criticism of the Gangster: “The thoughts he put in [Beli’s] head. Someone should have arrested him for it…the Gangster was simply an old chulo [pimp] preying on Beli’s naïveté” (126). However, after voicing this sentiment, he switches to second-person pronouns in a tentative defense of the Gangster, shifting the onus of forgiveness onto “you,” the reader. “But if you looked at it from, say, a more generous angle, you could argue that” the Gangster’s “adoration” was actually a “gift” to Beli, he claims (126-127). His tentativeness quickly snowballs into outright veneration; the Gangster’s attention is a gift, he continues, in the sense that it makes Beli feel “guapa [beautiful] and wanted and safe,” something that no one else had supposedly done for her (127). He ends with the assertion that, because he was the one who “taught [Beli] all about her body, her orgasms, her rhythms,” the Gangster “must be honored, no matter what happened in the end” (127).

I will address the sexual politics of this passage in a moment. First, it is worthwhile to try to unravel the layers of people speaking. It begins with the heterodiegetic narrator—not yet autodiegetic, since first-time readers do not yet know him as Yunior. He briefly not only focalizes through Beli, but suggests through textual cues (i.e., a first-person sentence in italics that seems to express Beli’s thoughts on the
matter) that she is narrating briefly. He then switches back to the more familiar narrator’s voice to declare—command—finally that the Gangster “must” be honored, completely undercutting the gravity of the Gangster’s sins. It is an authoritative passage in the sense that it does not reveal its own constructedness in the same way that other passages do (usually via footnotes). This authoritativeness matters, because it is also a passage that purports to inhabit another character’s “zone” (Bakhtin 317). “For the first time, I felt comfortable in my skin, like it was me and I was it,” somebody—presumably Beli—says, cheek by jowl with what is clearly La Inca’s judgment on the Gangster at the opening of the passage (“he’s a panderer…a thief of innocence!”) and somebody else’s vague defense of him (126-127). Elsewhere, the narrator takes pains to underline that he is the one putting the story together—why include these italics here, in Beli’s voice? And why include these particular words that so neatly let the Gangster—and men in general—off the hook for poor treatment of women as long as the sex is good? The answer, once we know more about Yunior as a character, seems obvious: this is not only a defense of the Gangster and his ways, but a self-defense as well. Rather than give us direct access to Beli’s consciousness, then, this section demonstrates the narrator’s desire to shape our understanding of the Gangster and the masculinity he represents. While loudly denouncing Trujillo’s dictatorship masculinity out of one side of his mouth, Yunior defends that very masculinity out of the other side, in large part because Yunior’s own

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12 For example, footnote 17: “In my first draft, Samaná was Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see the first paragraphs of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me!” (132).
masculinity is linked so intimately to Trujillo’s. Thus the person telling readers all about the evils of Trujillo’s dictatorship is, himself, a “minor dictator,” as Harford Vargas says.

This formal analysis squares with the sexual analysis, for, once unpacked, the sexual politics of this passage are quite disturbing. To summarize: the idea a) that a woman should be grateful to her older, male lover who purportedly taught her about her body even though this same lover’s lack of concern for her bodily integrity nearly causes her painful death, and b) that this sexual “education” (125) outweighs the harm that is a direct result of the education, seems clearly to be written from the self-serving perspective of the older, male lover—or from the perspective of someone who shares that lover’s values. From the narrator’s perspective, and no doubt, from the Gangster’s perspective as well (in fact, this is perhaps one place where the character’s zones are indistinguishable), a woman’s pleasure is something that a man gives her, a “gift,” inseparable from the feelings of successful integration into the patriarchal system (feeling “guapa and wanted and safe”). While safety is certainly a basic human need, as are love and self-esteem, all three of these things are tied in, for Beli, to her successful navigation of the patriarchy. Why doesn’t La Inca’s love make Beli feel “guapa and wanted and safe”? Perhaps because women’s love counts for less in a system in which they are circulating objects, not subjects.\(^\text{13}\)

The supposed “sexual education” that an older man gives a young woman is an old trope. In it, the sophisticated man is rejuvenated and the young woman becomes

\(^{13}\) In fact, it is La Inca who keeps Beli safe, to the extent that that is possible, from the wrath of the Gangster’s vengeful wife by arranging Beli’s exile to New York and “[carrying] a machete with her everywhere. Homegirl was ‘bout about it. Knew that when Gondolin falls you don’t wait around for the balrogs to tap on your door. You make fucking moves” (161).
sophisticated, with “sophistication” for women revolving around sexuality. (It is worth noting that the trope does not work the other way—for example, Dionisio’s wife, though older than the Gangster, is not credited with teaching him about his body, his rhythms. If this role exists for women at all, it is as kind and nurturing prostitute or loose woman.) Even if Beli agrees with the assessment that the Gangster gave her a “gift,” the assertion that he “adored” her can only be true in the most surface-level of ways, since he makes no attempt to do anything but keep her around for his own pleasure and does not inform her of the risk they are running by having an affair, an omission that leads to Beli’s brutal beating in the cane fields. Nor, in a larger sense, does he take responsibility for himself and his sexuality: the Gangster apparently feels no responsibility for informing Beli of the risk he has taken by cheating on his wife with her, nor does he appear to feel any compunction about lying to both women. In light of all this, Yunior’s assertion that the Gangster “must be honored, whatever [else] happened” is a particularly insidious defense of the power structures that allow and encourage male privilege even when it puts others’ lives in danger. Indeed, it is only in retrospect that the reader feels the full weight of this statement; twenty pages later, separating the education itself from its devastating aftermath, Yunior informs us that the beating this “education” led to was “the end of language, the end of hope” for Beli (147). Why does the narrator so clearly want readers to sympathize with the Gangster here if he has, as Weese says, changed from his interactions with the Cabrals/De Leóns? It can only be the case that he is failing, in this instance, to resist the seductive lure of normative masculinity, and his framing of the story is greatly affected by that seduction.
The heading of this sub-section, “The Gangster We’re All Looking For,”
gestures at Yunior’s complicity from the beginning, though, again, it is only in retrospect
that readers can really apprehend this. Yunior’s title alludes to his own desire to possess
and/or embody the Gangster. Here, the use of the first-person plural pronoun “we”
obeys the fact that it is Yunior projecting his own desires—his own complicated
relationship with the Gangster—onto “us all,” whoever might constitute that group—“The
Gangster I’m Looking For” would be much clearer. Just as Yunior cannot relinquish his
dictator masculinity, however, neither can he admit that it is his own desire to recuperate
the Gangster’s treatment of women that drives him to absolve the Gangster of his sins.

Yunior’s own first-person narration in Chapter 4, as I have already hinted, is the
turning point in the narrative, the moment after which Yunior abandons his slangy,
streetwise-but-in-control persona to adopt the more defensive, less certain role of a semi-
homodiegetic narrator trying to tell fact from fiction—or just to decide upon one fiction.
As Genette says, “the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic”; the final chapters of
_Oscar Wao_ show this quite clearly (Genette 236). Yunior-the-narrator is marked by
Yunior-the-character from Chapter 4, affecting in turn what the later Yunior includes and
doesn’t include in his narrative. In effect, the extradiegetic world that readers assume
Yunior inhabits throughout the first half of the novel explodes into the diegetic world of
Oscar and Lola in Chapter 4, and Yunior is unable to return to that extradiegetic perch
afterwards. In Chapter 4, Yunior transitions from the smart and well-read Dominican
narrator we have enjoyed to this point into the somewhat petty, jock-ish secret nerd that

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14 Yunior-the-narrator is also, crucially, Yunior-the-writer-of-the-book. (Of course, there is
another _Oscar Wao_, written by Junot Diaz, that exists concurrently/palimpsestically with the one
Yunior is writing.)
he was in college. Besides Chapter 1, this is also where we learn a significant amount about Oscar himself. Because Oscar’s friendships and relationship-building habits are filtered through Yunior’s own limited view, however, the picture that emerges is of a fat, friendless, suicidal, queer (“homo”) Oscar. In spite of Yunior’s repeated claims that Oscar is “friendless,” however, at other points, he has revealed that Oscar does indeed have friends: besides Al and Miggs, there are “two other writing-section clowns” in college (180), not to mention Jenni Muñoz and Ana Obregón (albeit Yunior sees these as “friend-zoning” relationships that fail). It is tempting to take Yunior’s words at face value, to trust him as the heterodiegetic narrator he has been up to this point. But he calls attention to his homodiegetic narrator status at the very beginning of Chapter 4: “It started with me” (167). This unambiguous first-person pronoun marks a switch from anonymous, heterodiegetic narrator to specific autodiegetic narrator, and signals to readers that what follows (and in retrospect, what preceded) is subjective.

Yunior-as-autodiegetic narrator is much more overtly sexist, hostile, and foul-mouthed than the unnamed heterodiegetic narrator. All of the trust that the heterodiegetic narrator has built with readers up to this chapter is put to the test, as Yunior focalizes through his younger self, and implicitly demands sympathy from readers. For example, Yunior refers to Jenni Muñoz, a Goth Puerto Rican girl at Rutgers, as a “diabla” [she-devil] and “fucking crazy,” though nothing he will go on to say about her indicates that these descriptors are accurate. He also snarks that while “[e]very day was Halloween for this girl,” nonetheless he had “[n]ever seen a body like that,” implying that any woman

15 As a point of comparison, Yunior’s own friends are not all that awesome; one of the first things he does as homodiegetic narrator is reveal that only Lola helped him out when he was beaten by a group of men on the street: “Of all the friends I had—all my great fucking friends—only Lola came fucking through” (168).
who does not comply strictly with conventional norms of beauty and sexiness should immediately be disqualified from his potential pool of sexual partners, but that Jenni’s sexy body overrides her unusual fashion choices and makes her acceptable (182). However, much to Yunior’s chagrin, Jenni laughs at his attempt to hit on her, effectively emasculating him (182). Yunior, therefore, has a lot of motivation to read Oscar’s interactions with Jenni not as a successful friendship, if an unsuccessful romance, but as another example of Oscar’s “freak” status, his inability to, in essence, be like Yunior, who is working very hard to be a “normal” Dominican.16

It takes an awareness of Yunior-as-autodiegetic narrator, suddenly the star and focalized consciousness of this section, to resist the negative conclusions he draws about Oscar here. The fact is that, in spite of Yunior’s attempts to paint Oscar’s life as a failure, Oscar is, indeed, friends with Jenni Muñoz. From Yunior’s perspective, it is completely confounding that Jenni does not “vaporize [Oscar’s] ass” for daring to talk to her, since Yunior himself has already received a rude brush-off. Oscar’s interactions with Jenni are barely intelligible to the autodiegetic Yunior: he continues to refer to Oscar as “hitting on” Jenni, but what Oscar actually does is talk to her in the lunchroom using “his usual Battle of the Planets routine, sweat running down his face,” “[pin] comic books to her door,” and, finally, talk “about Alice Walker” in the dorm room that Yunior shares with Oscar (183-184). Oscar seems not only interested in her because she has “the biggest roundest tits you’ve ever seen,” which is what Yunior emphasizes about her, but because they have shared interests, and he talks to her about those interests.

16 Machado points out that Oscar’s final conversation with Yunior about why Yunior continues to cheat on Lola, cracks Yunior’s narrative façade, showing Yunior as the one with issues, not Oscar (542). Yunior’s issues are, of course, present throughout the narrative, especially Chapter 4, but this moment near the end shows Oscar’s “insightful clarity” as well.
Additionally, Oscar insists on a respect for Jenni that Yunior-as-autodiegetic narrator cannot even acknowledge as legitimate. When Yunior asks Oscar, “How can you be in love? You just met the bitch,” Oscar insists “darkly” that Yunior and his friends not “call [Jenni] a bitch” (183), even though it would be very easy for Oscar to go along with this terminology in the all-male confines of his dorm room. (In fact, it would be a great way for Oscar to insert himself into the masculine society from which he is so thoroughly alienated, as Yunior continually reminds readers.) In spite of his tendency to editorialize, to wax poetic about motivations and give us copious background information in the footnotes as the heterodiegetic narrator of Chapters 1-3, here Yunior simply lets this protestation of Oscar’s go without comment, except to report his friend Melvin’s mockery of Oscar’s defense of Jenni: “Yeah, Melvin imitated, don’t call her a bitch” (183). This attitude is at least partially due to the fact that Oscar dares to defy a heteropatriarchal order that Yunior is both fascinated and trapped by. Oscar succeeds at something—namely, friendship with a woman—that is out of reach for Yunior, although Yunior, as autodiegetic narrator, cannot admit that. As Machado points out, Yunior goes to great lengths to normalize Oscar’s queerness and marginality by ending the novel with his “achievement” of heterosexual intercourse—the ultimate marker, in this novel, of manhood—instead of dealing with “[his] own shit” (Diaz 175).

Although, as Machado and Weese, among others, have noted, Yunior becomes much less authoritative after his autodiegetic entrance in Chapter 4, he does not therefore automatically become less patriarchal as a consequence, complicating Weese’s claim that Yunior has “changed” or learned from his experience with Oscar and Lola. While he may have reflected on some of his actions, as Weese contends, he is still unable to completely
disavow the power and privilege of his normative masculinity. For example, in Chapter 5, “Poor Abelard,” when the Cabral family are invited to a party thrown in Trujillo’s honor (a thin pretense for El Jefe to have access to Abelard’s oldest daughter, Jacquelyn), Abelard makes the mistake of complaining to his neighbor—albeit covertly. “It’s madness! Sheer madness! I’m the father of my household! I’m the one who says what goes!” he raves (229). His neighbor, knowing the high stakes of such “treasonous” talk, says nothing, and Abelard is later arrested by the Secret Police for supposedly making a joke at El Jefe’s expense. It is noteworthy that Yunior has Abelard make this critique in terms of being the patriarch, the one who “says what goes.” One might expect Abelard’s protests to the party would center around his objection to his daughter’s almost-certain rape should she show up; while that is indeed part of it, when he loses his cool here, his main complaint—that is, the main complaint Yunior provides for him—is about who gets to control the narrative.

One might object that Yunior is drawing a parallel between the constructedness of narrative and the constructedness of gender categories, as Weese does. Yet the attention that Yunior devotes to this anecdote suggests not an undermining of gender categories, but an obsession with authority. Since Abelard is also supposedly writing a book about Trujillo, and Yunior seems to believe that it is actually his book, and not his daughter, that causes Abelard’s downfall, who controls the narrative is obviously important, to Abelard and to Yunior. (Indeed, as I have already pointed out, though Oscar Wao seems polyvocal, Yunior controls and filters all voices.) Disdaining the “rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted” for being as “common as krill,” Yunior says that “[i]t’s one of those
easy stories because in essence it explains it all,” the implication being, apparently, that a less easy explanation might be more true (245).

Yunior’s objection to this “rap” is complex. On the one hand, the explicit dig at Vargas Llosa and The Feast of the Goat (“Mario Vargas Llosa didn’t have to do much but open his mouth and sift [the story] out of the air” [244]) in the novel has some truth to it. Blaming the entire dictatorship on Trujillo’s sexual appetites is too simple, in part because it writes Trujillo off as a deviant pervert and explains his evil as part of his general perversity, instead of as part of the legacy of violence unleashed with “the screams of the enslaved” (Díaz 1). (However, there is a legitimate argument to be made that Trujillo’s treatment of women is a good metonym for his treatment of the country.) The alternative that Yunior offers to this “rap,” however, does not really feel satisfying, either: Abelard’s book argues that “it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world!” (245). In the sense that this does no more to relieve or explain the atrocities and suffering that went on both inside and outside of the Dominican Republic during and after the regime than the “rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted,” the “supernatural being” explanation is simply an alternative that does not even cast Trujillo in a negative light, at least in terms of fitting in to the heteropatriarchal order; “he is so powerful that he must be from another planet” could be a compliment as well as an insult. This fits with Yunior’s more laissez-faire attitude throughout the second

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17 In an interview with Edwidge Danticat, Diaz reinforces this view of Vargas Llosa’s novel, although he does not focus explicitly on the Trujillo-as-rapist element as closely as Yunior does. “Pardon me while I hate, but people jumped on [The Feast of the Goat] like it was the greatest thing on earth! And you should have seen the Dominican elites fawning over Vargas Llosa. The Great Vargas Llosa has deigned to visit the Dominican Republic! Call me a nationalist slash hater, but Vargas Llosa’s take on the Trujillo regime was identical to Crassweller’s and Crassweller wrote his biography 40 years ago!”
half of the novel, but if, as Weese contends, Yunior has matured and grown by the end of the novel, we might expect a bit more of a pushback here. After all, Trujillo did rape many women; Yunior elsewhere says he “made the Dominican Republic the world’s first culocracy” (217) and was “a consummate culocrat till the end” (134n19). As Yunior acknowledges, the sexual-predator story is appealing because it is at least “something real” (246). Yunior pits the validity of science fiction/fantasy as a lens for interpreting experience against the more feminist analysis that sees Trujillo’s rule in terms of gender and masculinity without attempting to provide a definitive answer about either. “[I]f you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it,” Yunior says (Díaz 243). Perhaps the point here is that neither explanation does anything to reduce Trujillo’s “gangster” cool status; Yunior, in spite of his knowledge that Trujillo was the author of unspeakable atrocities, rapes, genocide, etc., cannot disavow the cachet, the lure, of the masculinity Trujillo represents. This makes sense, because, as Harford Vargas notes, Trujillo is but one (albeit representative) iteration of the destructive masculinity begun with the conquest of the New World.

Contrasting Lola’s sections with Beli’s story shows quite clearly the difference between Yunior as heterodiegetic narrator and Lola as an autodiegetic narrator in a metadiegetic story level with Yunior as narratee. As Yunior tells it, Beli sees her body more as a tool that allows her access to power than as an integral part of herself for which she fears violation or in which she takes any kind of autonomous pride—it is as though

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18 Bilingual puns on “culo” (ass).

19 T. S. Miller, in “Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” argues that Oscar Wao supports the legitimacy of using science fiction as a lens through which to interpret the world.
Beli’s consciousness does not exist outside of the male gaze. For example, when Beli goes through puberty, after a month of catcalls and lewd passes, she discovers “the hidden mechanisms that drove these comments,” namely, that “men liked her…a fucking lot” (93). (By contrast, Lola’s experience of being raped as a child by a family friend, and her family’s reaction of “judgment and bochinche [gossip]” makes her “tougher than adamantine” [25].) Beli’s body is always sexualized in Yunior’s descriptions, and while he is sympathetic to Beli during her adolescence, recognizing the shame that can accompany a newly adult body, he also transforms her from girl into pornographic fantasy with very little space in the middle where Beli explores her own body or sees herself through her own eyes, rather than a man’s. Beli recognizes that her body is her ticket out of “dull-ass Baní,” but in fact this is only true in a very tortuous way: her body attracts the Gangster, who betrays her so badly that she is forced to flee for her life. (The other viable option for a poor woman with a desirable body to get out of “dull-ass” small towns is, of course, represented by Ybón, the prostitute.)

Lola’s utterly different narrational voice works as a counterexample that highlights just how similar Yunior’s various focalizations are. Lola’s sections, because they alone are narrated by Lola herself and not by Yunior, portray Lola as a more round person and her sexuality as more believable. Adolescent Lola is always keenly aware of the possibility of rape and betrayal, while the narrator’s version of Beli is not. Both Beli and Lola recognize that their sexuality—their bodies—constitute their strongest bargaining chips to escape their home life. However, Lola is also aware of the limitations

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20 One need only search for a similarly sexualized description of a male body in *Oscar Wao* (spoiler: there are none) to realize just how much Yunior defines women in the novel by their bodies.
of this strategy, and does not confuse it for love, at least not for long. Additionally, unlike Yunior, who relies on the mystical, semi-fatalistic fukú to explain the events of the story, Lola emphatically rejects the notion of a family curse. “If you ask me I don’t think there are any such things as curses,” she says. “I think there is only life. That’s enough” (205). The fukú, that narrative strategy par excellence, does not fascinate Lola. She takes responsibility for her actions, and even pinpoints the complex and tangled causes of Oscar’s death: “Ten thousand Trujillos is all we are,” she claims, underscoring the dictatorship’s—and colonialism’s—lasting effects (324).

Part of these differences between Lola and Beli may be due to the generational differences between the two characters. Beli, living in the Dominican Republic in the 1950s, is largely unaware of the ways that patriarchy has shaped her femininity, while Lola, in the urban U.S. of the 1980s and 1990s, understands that being a “normal” girl means being submissive, pleasing to men—and she rebels against this. Hence, Lola goes through a “Siouxsie and the Banshees-loving punk” phase (Díaz 54) and insists that being the “perfect Dominican daughter” is “just a nice way of saying the perfect Dominican slave” (56). Beli, by contrast, has no vibrant counterculture available to her as a means of resistance except that of being a university student, like her boyfriend Arquímédes, a position that is both radically political and coded as male (110). Even given these differences, however, it is Yunior’s narration that limits Beli’s imagination, her desire for freedom. As I explain above, it is Yunior who is supposedly giving us access to Beli’s consciousness, not Beli herself. Perhaps the Gangster represents a way out of her (relatively peaceful) life with La Inca. Perhaps youthful naiveté and faith in the power of love (or sex) do entirely explain Beli’s blindness, her willingness to be with the Gangster.
But in a fictional world, they don’t have to. That is to say, as Yunior reminds us repeatedly in the final chapters, he does not have all the answers—he is making much of this up. Certainly, he is “making up” how Beli feels about herself, her sexuality, and her life in Trujillo’s Dominican Republic. If that is the case, then why turn young Beli into patriarchy’s perfect woman? Perhaps because, unlike Lola, who is willing to “turn her long back” on the masculinity Yunior, the Gangster, and even Trujillo represent (not to mention Aldo, her white boyfriend), young Beli can function as a balm to the wounds that the process of telling this story deals to that masculinity. Upon further reflection, then, “for that, he must be honored, no matter what happened in the end” sounds more like pleading than an assertion of fact.

Paying attention to Yunior’s narration, especially in terms of the various levels and voices Díaz employs throughout, makes Oscar Wao a novel not just about the immigrant experience, not just about the Dominican diaspora, not just about masculinity (though it is certainly about all of these things), but a novel about the enduring dangers of trusting a single voice to give us the truth. As the endings, voices, and possible explanations proliferate after the explosion onto the scene of autodiegetic Yunior, readers must decide what they believe, and deal with the existence of many “páginas en blanco,” blank pages, that nobody can fill in. Oscar Wao is a novel that starts by lulling readers into thinking they are getting a traditional narrative, only to turn that expectation completely on its head and challenge readers’ desires to trust the (patriarchal) authority of the “one voice” telling the story.
“Like in one of those connect-the-dot games”: So Far from God, Heteroglossia, Gossip, and Feminist Utopia

If the point about Oscar Wao is that it warns readers away from trusting a single voice, that even when that voice at first sounds heteroglossic, it can still be traced back to a single, compromised source, So Far from God demonstrates a way to get around that stricture, in part by reinventing the rules of evidence and in part by embracing a maligned and feminized mode of narration: gossip. While Oscar Wao self-consciously calls attention to its lack of compliance with “masculine” narrational norms, So Far from God enacts these alternative norms more or less without comment. The narrator does not pretend to be omniscient, but neither does she worry about whether readers will believe her or find her credible. So Far from God taps into the tradition of feminist utopia21 by illustrating a world run communally. (I use the term “feminist utopia” here to describe Tome in the sense that women are respected and valued by most in the community and are relatively free to choose whatever they want to do, not in the sense that men are absent.) Paradoxically, it is the narrator’s lack of self-consciousness—her ability to be a conduit for the thoughts and feelings of her characters while resisting the shaping that narrators typically engage in—that makes her account heteroglossic.

21 Especially as expressed in Robin Silbergleid’s article, “Women, Utopia, and Narrative: Toward a Postmodern Feminist Citizenship,” So Far from God participates in the feminist project of disrupting the “masculinist discourses of citizenship” by depicting a society where women exist outside of the patriarchal descent of goods (157). In these discourses, Silbergleid argues, there is a direct connection between “family romance and mercantile success. As such, this narrative trajectory [i.e., of women raising sons to become good workers] becomes inextricable from assumptions of liberal citizenship” (157). She goes on to argue that second-wave feminist utopian novels “establish a new relationship between women and the nations of which they are members, calling into question the overdetermination of the bourgeois family and replacing traditional governments with social structures based on community and harmony with the natural world” (157-58). Such a description also applies to many Latina/o texts, too, including So Far from God.
Many critics of *So Far from God* draw attention to the unusual voice of the narrator, but they either align this with the novel’s supposed *telenovela* stylistics or they simply note it as a self-evident feature of Chicana resistance to norms. While these approaches can be useful and, indeed, illuminate the issues at play in Castillo’s work, they fail to fully account for what I call the structural weirdness of *So Far from God.*

Many critics also seem divided between a desire to read the novel’s layered but fairly obvious allegorical references and a desire to give Castillo credit for writing an original and entertaining novel that also educates its readers. Thus, articles like Barbara Cook’s “La Llorona and A Call for Environmental Justice in the Borderlands: Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*” and Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s “‘The Pleas of the Desperate’: Collective Agency versus Magical Realism in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*” both point out the narrator’s preoccupation with environmental justice and argue that her narrative style empowers the people of the community to tell stories of agency and survival, rather than oppression and loss. Many critics also point out the revision of traditional stories in which the narrator engages; Collette Morrow and Danizete Martínez both read the novel as revamping or revising traditional narratives about women and sexuality to tell empowering new narratives. Michelle M. Sauer draws a parallel between medieval communal saint-making practices and Castillo’s narrative; and Laura Gillman and Stacey Floyd-Thomas read the novel’s characters as straightforward allegorical representations of Chela Sandoval’s “five modes of resistance” outlined in *Methodology of the Oppressed.* Ralph E. Rodriguez refers to the narrator’s “sarcastic tone” that, in part, marks it as a contestatory novel rather than a novel of resistance. Although all of these critics must, by necessity, discuss the work of the narrator in their readings, none of them
dwell on the deeper implications of this narrative voice, seeing it either as representative of Chicana resistance to (Anglo, male) norms, or favoring other themes above this one. Clearly, So Far from God concerns itself with issues of social justice; yet exactly how the narrator conveys this sense of social engagement is often left underdeveloped.

In spite of this lack of focus on the mechanics of the narrator, one thing critics do consistently point out about her is her status as a “mitotera,” a word that can mean trouble-maker, activist, or gossip—the English idiomatic equivalent might be, “one who ‘stirs the pot.’” This aspect of the narrator’s identity is a crucial part of the project of the novel as a whole. Gossip is traditionally a disdained (but useful, not to mention old) literary form, the province of (all) women and unscrupulous men. Because of its quotidian nature, recording gossip is not respected as an art form in the same way that writing epic poetry or (more recently) narrating a novel is. Nor is information that is passed on through gossip—in other words, through marginal and unofficial channels—respected as legitimate or verifiable. As Patricia Meyers Spacks says in her book Gossip, though narrators may “toy with [gossip]…to exploit the note of intimate relationship with the reader,” in the end, “most narrators reject the style of gossip in favor of more comprehensive, more dignified forms of interpretation” (Spacks 206). What’s more, gossip is associated with sentimentality—with feelings and emotions rather than cold, hard facts. In Having A Good Cry, Robin Warhol argues that the academic as well as popular biases against sentimentality lie “in a powerful but seldom-challenged model of the relationships among emotions, the body, and texts” that privileges “real” emotions yielded by “legitimate” art and dismisses as effeminate those emotions that are produced
through sentimental texts (Warhol 33). Such effeminate responses are usually linked to popular culture; therefore, when a production of King Lear makes us cry, it is acceptable, but not when a soap opera does. Together, the bias against gossip as a legitimate mode of narration and the bias against sentimentality are enough to condemn So Far from God.

Indeed, Latina/o and Latin American scholar Ilan Stavans finds the novel “sentimental and cartoonish,” a mix of “magic realism” and “social satire” where “whores, miracles, prophecies, resurrections, and a visit to the Chicano activism of the sixties intertwine” (Stavans 37). Though Stavans professes to be a fan of Castillo’s, and lauds her as the most “experimental” of a group of Latina writers including Cristina Garcia and Sandra Cisneros, he pans So Far from God as “uneven, annoying, and often conventional”; it is not as sophisticated as his favorite Castillo novel, The Mixquiahuala Letters, he implies, which refers in its structure back to Argentinian literary giant Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela (Hopscotch). Putting aside Stavans’ mischaracterizations of the novel (for example, there are no “whores” in So Far, only sexually active unmarried women, and only one resurrection—that of La Loca, whose name should imply her special status in the community), his review also reads as curiously tone-deaf to the potential for subversion present in the novel. While Stavans sees So Far as an unsuccessful parody of telenovelas, it is the very sentimentality of the novel—not as a parody of a popular form, but as a reinscription of the rules of the game—that is part of its radical project of disrupting patriarchal narratives.

So Far from God’s episodic structure and gossipy tone are best understood as part of a strategy to reclaim a maligned and feminized form. Claiming that So Far from God
parodies, imitates, or re-appropriates the Spanish-speaking *telenovela* has become something of a popular critical sport in *So Far* commentary, probably because it is such a convenient way to deal with the weird structure of the novel.\(^{22}\) Though it is not inaccurate to describe the novel as resembling a *telenovela* in some respects, such a description does not sufficiently explain why *So Far* ends somewhat inconclusively with a silly chapter about the trivial details of the group M.O.M.A.S. (Mothers of Martyrs and Saints) and Pope Joan. While *So Far from God* is indeed episodic, and while it follows several women’s lives, including their love lives, and contains some fantastic or melodramatic events, I argue that it is saved from the melodrama characteristic of *telenovelas* by the tart tongue of the narrator. Associating the novel with *telenovelas*, even when meant as praise, sidesteps the narratological issues at play, gives an inaccurate picture of the tone of the novel, and perhaps even deflates its feminism somewhat.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\)Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiack’s chapter in *Postmodern Vernaculars: Chicana Literature and Postmodern Rhetoric*, “Little Women meets *The Flintstones*: Blending Genres and Blending Cultures in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* and Sandra Cisneros’s ‘Little Miracles, Kept Promises’” articulates the “*So Far from God*-as-*telenovela*” argument most intelligently, although I still find some parts of this line of thought unconvincing. Mermann-Jozwiack takes the time to enumerate the ways that she believes *So Far from God* resembles *telenovelas* rather than taking this comparison as a self-evident fact; for Mermann-Jozwiack, the episodic, stand-alone structure of the chapters and the melodramatic cast of events are the primary reasons the novel is like a *telenovela*. Like Stavans, she also points out that three of Sofi’s daughters names are evocative of the 1974 Mexican mini-novela *Fe, Esperanza Y Caridad* (dir. Alberto Bojórquez [Fe], Luis Alcoriza [Esperanza], and Jorge Fons [Caridad]). Of course, Sofi’s daughters’ names also evoke—perhaps primarily—the cardinal Christian virtues: hope, faith, and charity (or love).

\(^{23}\)Pace Barbara Kingsolver in her *Los Angeles Times* review, it is not necessarily the case that those who enjoy *telenovelas* will also enjoy *So Far from God* (though of course it is possible that there will be significant overlap between these two groups). Further, aligning the novel with *telenovelas* serves to flatten the diversity of Mexican and Mexican-American culture, to say nothing of U.S. Latino/a culture, for a wider, non-Latino/a audience who may be unfamiliar with *telenovelas* and Mexican/Chicano/a culture. It also assumes that the primary influence on a Chicana woman writer is popular cultural artifacts, discounting the high-brow influences that may be at play, and that certainly are at play in Castillo’s work. In short, while the “*So Far from God* as *telenovela*” argument has some merit, it seems like a mistake to me to overgeneralize the novel
Another way to think of the structure of this novel is as a network-like web of connection; instead of emphasizing her own role in the process of assembling the narrative, highlighting the things she does not know, and by extension highlighting what readers can never know, as Yunior does in *Oscar Wao*, Castillo’s narrator embraces the role of storyteller by immersing herself in those stories and emphasizing the connections between characters rather than their relationship to her or to official records and documents. In the process, she rewrites oppressive scripts for her characters—for example, when she attributes Caridad’s brutal maiming to an inhuman force (discussed more below). By not pointing out this revision process, the narrator normalizes it. This is not to say that she does not acknowledge uncertainties or ambiguities in her story, however; if that were the case she would be no different from a traditional heterodiegetic third-person narrator. Instead, she frequently attributes her knowledge to anonymous but widely accepted sources. For example, in Chapter 12, she describes Francisco El Penitente after his suicide as “dangling sorrowful-like like a crow-picked pear from a tall piñon,” then adds to this localized, poetic phrase, “which was how someone had first put it and how it was remembered after that” (212). Rather than footnote this information, explaining how she came across it, she merely notes that “someone” has come up with this phrase, and that that is how it is remembered now. She thus redefines the parameters of “acceptable” narrative outside of the male, Western discourse of The Author that Yunior enters. Refusing to play by the rules that Yunior protests but by which he

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this way. This is not to imply that feminism needs to be self-serious or highbrow or academic to “count,” but neither should the label be reflexive or unthinkingly applied to everything; just because telenovelas focus upon women does not make them feminist.
ultimately feels bound, Castillo’s narrator valorizes communal, unofficial reports as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Rather than a narrative with a single focal point (Yunior), the narration in *So Far from God* is decentered, moving from “dot” to “dot” and back and forth in lines more like a computer or electrical network than a web, as shown in Figure 1 above. The opening paragraphs of Chapter 8 hint at the kind of narrative “games” being played in this novel; “with some patience (a virtue no one could ever have too much of) a few people,” the narrator claims, are able to tease out the connections between characters, “like in one of those connect-the-dots games” (120). The reference to a connect-the-dots game is apt, since her descriptions of events do indeed require readers to piece together different parts if they are interested in seeing a “big picture” narrative. However, the “big picture” of the novel has little to do with Sofi and her daughters, and more to do with the possibilities of rewriting oppressive stories. She speaks with authority, but it is the authority of a long-time resident of a town who knows everybody well and knows what to expect from them, rather than a god-like omniscient narrator, or even a writer who has done his homework. In other words, this narrator is herself a *mitotera*, as noted above. Her authority is the same kind that, when presented with alternative facts, will simply say, “Well, I heard it this way…” As many critics point out, *So Far from God* reframes several traditional misogynist scripts in telling its characters’ stories; this narrator is more interested in retelling oppressive stories than in pointing out her own fallibility. What’s more, this lack of a centralized focus on one character’s point of view means that what should be a tragedy, by any measure of traditional family sagas—at the end of the novel, Sofi is husbandless, landless, and childless, struggling to survive financially—is somehow
beside the point. Instead, the novel feels optimistic and energetic, in spite of the heavy subject matter. By refusing to play by the “rules” of modern epistemology, the narrator challenges the basis of singular authoritative accounts of any history.24

The narrator refers to herself using the first-person, employing external focalization and what might best be described as a heterodiegetic first-person narrator, but she rarely attracts attention to herself or her process of storytelling. For example, the narrator refers to Fe’s friends, whom she has chosen as bridesmaids over her three sisters, with the mildly derogatory “gabachas [white girls],” and then comments parenthetically, “my term, not Fe’s” (29). At another point, after La Llorona tells Loca that Esperanza has died in the Middle East, the narrator refers to “La Llorona, Chicana astral-traveler” (162). This phrase is not clearly in any one character’s “voice,” and it occurs in a sentence that also contains the phrase “as I said.” These possessive pronouns and conventions of casual conversation and gossip make the narrator present as a subjective consciousness, but her deft focalizations through other characters decenter her as the emotional focal point of the narrative.

The narrator manages to convey both disapproval for the sexist antics of some of the characters as well as compassion for their humanity. For example, she focalizes through Esperanza during a phone call with Rubén in which Esperanza breaks up with him, but the narrator also focalizes through Rubén during this phone call. The passage begins with Esperanza calling Rubén.

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24 In the Southwest, the rich history of indigenous and Criollo cultural production has been often ignored, overlooked, or lost by “official” American historiography. Thus, projects like the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project can recover from near-oblivion or obscurity texts that were published in the United States in the middle of the 20th century.
“Hey, how’s it goin’, kid?” he asked with his usual condescending manner, adding a little chuckle. Esperanza paused. He talked to her on the phone like she was a casual friend. A casual friend whom he prayed with and made love with, but whom he could not call on a given day to ask how she was doing. (39)

This list of resentment goes on for another half of a page, cataloguing all of the ways that Rubén disrespects and otherwise takes advantage of Esperanza, until it culminates with Esperanza deciding to dump Rubén. He “[gropes] for a response that would reinstate the pride just demolished by Esperanza’s abrupt rejection,” but is “cut short by a click” (40).

In this scene, the narrator deftly zigzags between the two characters’ focalizations. The litany of wrongs Rubén has done to Esperanza is, obviously, focalized through Esperanza, while the “groping” for pride seems best understood through Rubén’s eyes. Later, the narrator will focalize through Rubén at some length while he mourns Esperanza. These sections of zero focalization work to humanize Rubén, who is otherwise a despicable character, an emotional and financial sponge on Esperanza.

By refraining from self-consciously drawing attention to her revisionary tactics, the narrator normalizes these revisions. For example, in Chapter 12 “Of the Hideous Crime of Francisco el Penitente, and His Pathetic Calls Heard Throughout the Countryside as His Body Dangled from a Piñon like a Crow-Picked Pear; and the End of Caridad and Her Beloved Emerald, Which We Nevertheless Will Refrain from Calling Tragic,” represents Caridad’s and Esmeralda’s apparent death in Acoma as an assumption of sorts. Instead of being framed as a joint suicidal leap with the women driven to the edge (of sanity metaphorically; of a cliff literally) by a fanatical stalker and possible rapist, the Pueblo god Tsichtinako “calls” the women “not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth” (211). The narrator reports
that there is nothing at the bottom of the cliff after the jump, not splintered bodies or whole bodies, just the wind. This *Thelma and Louise*-style\(^{25}\) end for Caridad is both feminist and revisionary. It raises the specter of rape culture and the horrible damage such a culture can inflict, but appends a new ending to the familiar story. It is also a clear demonstration of the power of the narrator. She is not bound by realistic conventions, physics, laws of mass, etc. What should, indeed, be a tragic ending is instead refashioned into a spiritual experience, a choice the women made to be one with the earth and the indigenous spiritual world.

Rather than reading as ironic the deadly stalking of the trauma-survivor girlfriend of a rape crisis Assistant Director (i.e., Esmeralda), and the collateral damage of the Assistant Director’s death as well (and possibly her rape), the novel offers an alternative reading. Much in the same way that Sullivan from Isleta corrects Francisco’s medieval Christian notions about the nature of death (there is no hell after death, Sullivan claims, but only transformation into a Cloud Spirit, enabling one to nourish one’s people), the narrator here suggests that the women have not given in to despair or been hounded to death, but that they have used their final moments to exercise their agency and connect with the Pueblo spirit world. By giving agency back to Esmeralda and Caridad in the face of their stalker and harasser, Francisco, the narrative suggests that empowering and dignified endings are possible even in the face of the indefatigable tenacity of patriarchal violence. The narrator’s reframing of the “tragic” events does not point out their irony or

\(^{25}\) *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Ridley Scott) came out in 1991, two years before *So Far from God*’s publication. As in *So Far from God*, the film chronicles two women’s flight from abusive men, and ends with them escaping from a determined stalker (in this case, a detective) by driving off the edge of the Grand Canyon. Also as in *So Far from God*, the women have a strong connection to each other that can be read as lesbian desire. The last shot is a still of Louise’s ’66 Thunderbird in mid-air with the two women inside; the movie does not show the aftermath of the leap.
make light of the situation, or even present a dissociative account that characterizes much writing about trauma. Instead, the narration here shows the power of an alternative frame of reference. Instead of desperation and death, there is hope and transcendence.

While the scene in Acoma is certainly a climax of a sort, the narrator’s revisionist attitude is present early in the novel, as well, where Caridad is maimed, her nipples bitten off, “scourged with something, branded like cattle…[and] stabbed in the throat”; Caridad’s body after her encounter is “a nightmare incarnated” (Castillo 33). “But there are still those for whom there is no kindness in their hearts for a young woman who has enjoyed life, so to speak,” the narrator comments (33). This is why the police never even try to figure out who or what maimed Caridad so badly—a typical case of patriarchal sexism, it seems; Caridad “got what was coming to her” in the eyes of many. However, later on, the narrator describes the “malogra,” as “pure force” made of “sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment”—in other words, conquest and capitalism themselves, as Danizete Martínez points out (Martínez 223). Thus, what appears to have happened—Caridad’s severe beating and rape—is attributed to evil forces whose presence the narrator takes for granted. What is important is not the pain itself, but Caridad’s recovery and her bravery in facing the malogra in her dreams, where eventually “she would wrestle it to the ground, that wicked wool spirit, at the crossroad where she knew it still waited with nothing better to do” (78). The emphasis here is not on the violence Caridad suffers—a violence she cannot control or prevent—but her response to it.

As she does with the script of the “loose woman,” the narrator rewrites the script of the “abandoned wife” in Chapter 13. In this chapter, Sofi finally remembers that it was
she who sent Domingo away, not he who “abandoned” the family. The scripts for
deckbeat dads and abandoned single mothers are so powerful that Sofi is only able to
realize that Domingo’s departure was her own idea when Domingo gambles away
everything she has. “Believe it or not, comadre” the narrator comments drily as she
relates Sofi’s realization about Domingo (Castillo 215). Indeed, it is a story that Sofi
herself has found unbelievable for twenty years; Sofi started the rumor of Domingo’s
abandonment when she sent him away, and the rest of the town quickly adopted this
version of events, too (215). So powerful is this script that a woman who does not
passively wait for her husband to gamble away all of her and her children’s livelihoods
while accepting it as the will of God is literally unintelligible—her story cannot be read,
digested, taken in, and is revised accordingly. No matter what actually happened, the
script for “fatherless children, broken families” is that men leave their wives, not that
wives throw them out, since the latter situation would certainly be seen as emasculating.
Once Sofi takes responsibility for herself and her community, however, nominating
herself La Mayor of Tome, she no longer passively endures Domingo’s presence, and he
is obliged to ask her permission to remain in the house.

In other words, rather than reinforcing the patriarchy by reacting to it with
outrage, the narrator defangs this system in a way that Yunior is never able to do simply
by refusing to tell the story in terms of female victimhood and powerlessness. After all,
whether we hear, “What a shame that she was hounded to her death by a stalker” or “She
should not have given him any encouragement,” we are hearing two versions of the same
story. What the narrator offers, instead, is a vision of women who resist evil forces
successfully, who suffer but are not powerless. Significantly, this revision also casts men
in general as human beings, not monsters. Unlike Silvio Sirias and Richard McGarry, who argue that the novel represents Chicana subversion but also that it emasculates all its male characters, I see So Far from God’s narrator pointing out at every turn that the men inflicting patriarchal trauma on the women of Tome are also damaged by this system. This is nowhere clearer than in the narrator’s treatment of Francisco El Penitente, Domingo, and Rubén; she empathizes with them but does not condone their misogynist actions. Men, too, are hurt by the heteropatriarchal, racist systems of America in So Far from God—they, too, need and benefit from a Xicanista26 utopia. In the economy of So Far from God, everybody deserves empathy.

Although So Far’s narrator is invested in revising misogynist and racist scripts, she is not invested in neat endings or resolved plotlines, as Chapter 8 succinctly demonstrates. Because the chapter is one of the places where the narrator jumps away from Sofi and her daughters briefly, I will quote its opening at some length here:

The sorrowful telling of Francisco’s demise takes as its point of departure an adventure (or what was seen by some people as a warning) that started in a small town far away, not scattered with tumbleweed but skirted by seaweed, known as Santa Cruz.
Now, neither the woman nor her companion in this account was Caridad’s Woman-on-the-wall in Chimayo, but with some patience (a virtue no one could ever have too much of) a few people actually made the connection in the end, like in one of those connect-the-dots games. It seems that these two Californian women would be thought of somehow as being responsible for Francisco’s end since who had asked them to come here in the first place? But this all depends on who is telling the story […]. (120)

The first four sentences swerve between a once-upon-a-time opening (“The sorrowful tale of Francisco’s demise…”) to a passive-aggressive plea to the reader to be patient, to

26 Xicanisma is a specific kind of Chicana feminism, coined by Ana Castillo in Massacre of the Dreamers (1994). It is a social justice-oriented theory that emphasizes the indigenous roots of Chicanas, valorizing the feminine.
the voice of townspeople who condemn the women for coming to the Southwest “in the first place.” But this sweeping scope is quickly abandoned after the narrator notes that the interpretations offered all depend “on who is telling the story.” After that point, the narrator remains focalized through Helena and Maria, the outsiders attempting to reach Truchas, New Mexico. Given that the rest of the novel is focalized through various residents of Tome, this obliquely acknowledged decision to tell the story from the outsiders’ perspective is telling. It connects the rest of the women in the novel to Helena and María, who are also victims of harassment from men, just like many other women in Tome. It also shows that the narrator is not just a bystander in Tome, but someone who can sympathize with and inhabit various points of view (as readers also see in Chapter 12).

This chapter is also, however, one of the least satisfying for readers in the sense that it does not provide answers to any of the questions it raises. While the title, “What Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account,” raises expectations for what the chapter will accomplish, no amount of readerly patience will resolve the disjointed mystery of this chapter. Readers may realize later that the Maria of Chapter 8 is probably the same Maria living with Esmeralda/Woman-on-the-Wall-at-Chimayó. However, the identity of the “terrorist” that Helena and Maria encounter on the road—the main action of this part—is left shadowy, as is the location of the interaction. Are they near Tome? Is the stalker Francisco, or one of his friends, or some unrelated person? Are the women being targeted because they are lesbians, outsiders, or both? Is Helena’s insight that “dudes are just dudes…even in the sacred land of the Anasazi” the
full explanation of this harassment (128)? Because in this chapter the narrator is focalized through the two women at the time that the events are happening, these questions go unanswered, but the narrator does not apologize for this or even really acknowledge it except indirectly in the plea for “patience” that is nonetheless coupled with the cryptic warning that only a few people will figure it out. Indeed, the critical silence on this chapter is deafening. Many, many readers do not “figure it out.”

Ultimately, the structure of the narrative refuses to leave readers with easy answers; instead of opening and closing the narrative with La Loca’s two deaths (which occur in Chapters 1 and 15), the final chapter, Chapter 16, is odd and short, breezing quickly past Loca’s death and funeral to focus on M.O.M.A.S. (Mothers Of Martyrs And Saints), the organization Sofi starts after Loca’s death. This strange ending underlines the notion that the novel is not about the breakdown of one family, but about the possibilities of kinship when patriarchal narratives are upended. While the cooperative that Sofi starts as La Mayor of Tome, Los Ganados Y Lana Cooperative, successfully revitalizes the economy of the town, M.O.M.A.S., an organization that is by nature hierarchical and exclusive, diverts Sofi’s community-building into less useful comparisons of relative status. The final words of the novel, in fact, form a syntactically confusing question about status:

After all, just because there had been a time way back when, when some fregados all full of themselves went out of their way to prove that none among them had the potential of being a mother [referring to the story of

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27 Not that readers will not supply their own answers; one class of mine reading the novel were convinced that it was Francisco harassing the women, in part because of the misty foreshadowing that occurs at the very end of the chapter, where Maria is said to have to confront the “fly eyes” of the “terrorist” again without Helena. The class remained stumped about the purpose of this chapter, however, at least at the beginning of class discussion.
Pope Joan], did it mean that there had to come a time when someone would be made to prove that she did? (Castillo 252)

In M.O.M.A.S., mothering a saint or martyr is the price of admission, not willingness to be part of the community, unlike Los Ganados Y Lana Cooperative. Also in contrast to Los Ganados Y Lana Cooperative, M.O.M.A.S. becomes commercialized and competitive, doing little to advance the interests of either Sofi or Tome, though the “news and advice” of the “santitos” are passed on “to relevant local or federal governments” in addition to friends and family (251). However, the narrator notes that the governments accept the advice “graciously” but “with some obvious skepticism,” emphasizing the ethereality of this organization and its lack of connection to the quotidian concerns of the people (251). Indeed, devotees of La Loca Santa are frustrated by her refusal to help them, and are unsure what, exactly, they should pray to her about (248). Given that Sofi herself started the “local government” of unincorporated Tome by declaring herself la Mayor and starting the cooperative, the contrast between the two groups’ relevance to everyday life could not be clearer.

The differences between the narrator’s voice in chapters 15 and 16 shows that the real tragedy of the novel is not necessarily the breakdown of a nuclear family, but the loss of community expressed so strongly in the procession to Albuquerque in chapter 15. Chapter 15, “La Loca Santa Returns to the World via Albuquerque Before Her Transcendental Departure; and a Few Random Political Remarks From the Highly Opinionated Narrator,” is one of the few places in this novel where the narrator leaves aside the focalizations of the various characters. Each station of the Cross during the Procession is associated with a problem experienced by the community: toxic factory
conditions, pesticide poisoning, the AIDS epidemic, nuclear power plants, and the mysterious, brief war in the Middle East for which Esperanza dies:

Jesus fell,
and people all over the land were dying from toxic exposure in factories. Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation […]
Jesus was helped by Simon and the number of those without jobs increased each day.
Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus’ face. Livestock drank and swam in contaminated canals.
Jesus fell a third time. The air was contaminated by the pollutants coming from the factories. (Castillo 242-43)

In spite of the assertion of the title that now we are going to receive “remarks” from our “highly opinionated narrator,” this is actually one of the few points in the novel where her voice becomes less obvious; this is not the gossipy mitotera narrator, but a more lyrical and restrained one who seamlessly weaves together Christ’s Passion and the problems afflicting Tome and the world. Further, the remarks are not “random”; they very pointedly highlight the toll that globalized capitalist systems can take on the poor around the world, in the U.S. and outside of it. This is the most politically pointed and focused chapter in the novel, and suggests that none of Sofi’s daughters’ deaths happened in isolation or without being connected to larger systems of oppression, misogyny, and abuse. This chapter ends with Loca’s peaceful death in the arms of a Marian/Llorona figure: “Loca went to sleep in the Lady’s arms thinking that…she certainly knew quite a bit about this world, not to mention beyond, too, and that made her smile as she closed her eyes” (245). This lyricism contrasts with the awkward question that ends Chapter 16, quoted above, about “proving” motherhood. The awkward ending is a way for the narrator to unsettle readers’ expectations that loose ends will be tied up and all problems
resolved. Instead, she suggests by ending on an interrogative note, the answers lie beyond the final page.

*So Far from God*’s narrator spins a tale that subtly undermines heteropatriarchy by presenting alternative—not always happy—versions of familiar stories in the familiar voice of the gossipy *mitotera*. The novel suggests that a feminist, Xicanista narrative might be one in which all of the answers are not made clear, and in which readers must participate in the story-making process. Nor is such a narrative one in which the sources of various oppressions can be totally eradicated, nor is it one in which pain can be avoided, as shown with Caridad and the *malogra* as well as the decimation of Sofi’s entire immediate and extended family by the end of the novel. Singular truths and happy endings are elusive in this terrain, but autonomy and self-respect are highly valued. Rejecting the linear, empirically oriented narrational style of many storytellers, the narrator of *So Far from God* challenges readers to question their assumptions and to rewrite their own scripts.28

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, both *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *So Far from God* feature powerful narrators who challenge readers’ assumptions about family, sexuality, race, and nation. If, as I propose at the outset of this chapter, these novels’ narrators engage with societal problems and stereotypes that have not been resolved, it is also true that the present moment is one in which movements for social justice and equality are both more marginalized and more aware of each other than ever before. In

28 This ambiguity results in a wide range of critical interpretations of the novel. Many critics read the characters as broad types, while others, myself included, see Castillo’s revision of scripts as empowering of marginal identities.
other words, in a supposedly “post-racial” and “post-feminist” time—or at least a time where the possibility that we might be “post-” anything is bandied about—these novels provide models of storytelling that engage in complex expressions of identity, that acknowledge many different kinds of oppression as well as the ways we all can participate in it. The novels conform to some norms of artistic production while also resisting the idea that they must play by those rules.

While the overtly political agendas of 1960s and ’70s Latina/o literature, like that of Piri Thomas (Chapter 4), may be less prominent in contemporary Latina/o literature, it does not follow that contemporary Latina/o authors, especially those who enjoy great commercial success in non-Latino markets like Díaz and Castillo, have sold out their communities or write apolitical novels, as Dalleo and Machado remind us in *The Latino/a Literary Canon and Post-Sixties Literature*. Indeed, *Oscar Wao* especially benefits from close critical scrutiny, as I have shown above, and both novels are clearly political without being prescriptive. Both *So Far from God* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* challenge the idea that narratives must have an authoritative voice that tells readers how to interpret the story and guides them to a single ending. By unsettling the authoritative (male) narrator, the novels also unsettle what we think we know about history and culture, clearing the way for new and productive modes of thought about identity, language, and social structures.
CHAPTER FOUR

CHERRIE MORAGA AND QUEER KINSHIP

These spaces in which we reimagine the meanings of “kin,” “love,” “sex,” and “intergenerational friendship” are not places we have necessarily been or know and so they demand imaginative creation.

--Drucilla Cornell, *At The Heart of Freedom*

If there is a single issue almost always at stake in Chicano/a cultural politics since the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, it is the family in some shape, form, or fashion.

--Richard T. Rodri guez, *Next of Kin*

The role of the imagination in rethinking family structures cannot be overstated.

Cherríe Moraga’s work—with its accounts of her break with family, love for her mother tied to lesbian sexuality, creation of new, queer, Chicano/a family, and the birth of her son—demonstrates the kind of reimagination of kinship that Cornell identifies. Yet Moraga is more than just an exemplar of the relevance of Cornell’s work—she is not merely another “Third World woman writer” justifying and legitimizing the poststructurally-inclined identity theories of white women.\(^1\) She is also, for that matter, more than an example of the continuing relevance of Chicano/a studies and identity

\(^1\) Sandra Soto, speaking specifically about queer theory, calls this the “see-for-instance” use of women of color: “Too often queer theory continues to render race, ethnicity, and nation as niches within a broader, and unremarked, white erotics. In Chapter 1 I call this rendering the ‘see-for-instance’ endnote. Queer theorists’ engagement with queers of color, or with racial formation more broadly, is still too often contained in the tiny-font endnotes at the backs of books. These usually refer back to acknowledgments of ‘intersectionality’ that often go something like this: ‘thanks to women of color we now know that we have to address the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation.’ *Reading Chican@ Like A Queer*, p.17.
politics. On the one hand, some queer theorists, feminists, and gender scholars cite Moraga as evidence of the fluidity of identity, and on the other hand, some Chicano/a scholars use her as evidence of the relevance of identity politics. What both camps have in common is a tendency to flatten Moraga into evidence of one thing or another. What’s more, both sides tend to read a linear narrative of “coming-out” or “homecoming,” sexual and racial, in Moraga’s autobiographical narratives. I wish to avoid this tendency to flatten by “dislodging [Moraga’s] work from the register of evidence,” as Sandra Soto does in Reading Chican@ Like A Queer, through careful close reading and attention to publication histories (Soto 18). Such close reading also leads me to propose that Moraga’s work is more usefully conceptualized not in terms of linearity, but in terms of loops, digressions, returns, and circularity, as illustrated by the metaphor of the spirograph.

This is not to say that Moraga’s work is not evidence of the multiple and layered subject positions she occupies as a “half-breed” Chicana lesbian feminist mother. However, it is to say that accounts that use her work in this way are only partially faithful to Moraga’s rich and complex words, and to the entirety of her body of work—an oeuvre that is not obvious, simple, or teleological. I argue, instead, that the themes of familia, blood, tribe, and incestuous desire emerge from Moraga’s early and late, prosodic and dramatic writings in ways that complicate notions of linear progression (or even, as Moraga would have it, a kind of linear, trans-temporal “return” to ancestral practices). Rather than being self-evidently politically progressive or politically radical because of her status as a Chicana lesbian, then, Cherrie Moraga’s work is a feminist, anti-racist and decolonizing approach to theorizing the family because it continually revisits what family
entails and how it can function without settling on one prescriptive form. Instead of focusing on which side of the academic “identity” debate Moraga falls, I use the trope of “family” to bring to light the complexity of her work.

Cherríe Moraga effectively came to the attention of women-of-color feminist activists and academics in 1981, when she coedited *This Bridge Called My Back* with Gloria Anzaldúa, still hailed as a first or foundational woman-of-color, queer text. Subsequent to this endeavor, Moraga published her autobiographical, genre-mixing *Loving In The War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios* in 1983; most of the essays and poems in this edition focus on her relationship to her mother and to claiming herself as Chicana and as lesbian. In 1986, Moraga published *Giving Up The Ghost*, her first play (to be republished in a slightly different form in 1994’s *Heroes and Saints and Other Plays*). In 1993, she published another autobiographical book of prose and poetry, *The Last Generation*, this time examining her relationship with her white family, but also suffusing these essays with a mourning of the loss of lineal descendants that queer family seemed to entail and that was implicit in the marriage and pairing off of her heterosexual family members (hence the title “the last generation”). She published her memoir

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2 Catrióna Rueda Esquibel troubles its status as the “first” Chicana lesbian text, however, in *With Her Machete In Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* (2006). As Esquibel points out, there were self-consciously lesbian texts written by Chicanas before 1981, and Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s tokenization as representative of “Chicana lesbian writing” marginalizes other writers and limits the scope of both Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s wide-ranging work. “The work of Moraga and Anzaldúa is rarely perceived as being situated within a genealogy of Chicana lesbian writing. Instead they are decontextualized: Moraga is figured as the representative and/or definitive Chicana lesbian, and thus as a unique phenomenon; and Anzaldúa’s theories and models of mestizaje, borderlands, and identity, as mapped out in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), are discussed quite apart from her lesbianism” (2).

3 Until very recently (March 1st, 2015), it had also been out of print for decades, suggesting that in spite of Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s great influence on Chicana/o, Latina/o, and women’s and gender studies, these kinds of texts remain marginal and less than profitable.
Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood in 1997; it chronicles the process of her pregnancy and the birth of Rafael, her son, from the DIY artificial insemination (involving a mason jar and a syringe) to the months in the NICU after Rafael’s birth, to the state of her relationship with her partner, Ella, a few years after Rafael’s birth. Moraga returned to Loving in the War Years in 2000, making subtle changes to the existing text and adding a new foreword (titled “Looking Back”) and an entirely new section at the end of the book called “A Flor de Labios” that includes four poems alternating with four essays. (This “poem-essay” structure is also present in Xicana Codex, below). South End Press labels this edition of Loving an “expanded second edition,” but the expansions are not marked or obvious, nor are they advertised on the front cover or marked in the table of contents, requiring the reader to cross-check against a first edition (all citations here are from the expanded edition unless otherwise noted.) In 2011, Moraga published a new collection of essays and poetry interspersed with drawings by her partner, Celia Herrera Rodriguez, titled A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010.

It is important that Moraga added new material to Loving in the War Years, arguably her most widely-read single-authored work, rather than including that material in Xicana Codex (with which “A Flor de Labios” has much in common, thematically and structurally) or publishing it separately from Loving. The new writing, as Moraga herself acknowledges in “Looking Back,” is not necessarily of a piece with the old writing; “some things have changed,” she says (Loving v). The new writing next to the old represents an “evolution of thought” that “might provide some insights for each of us about our own evolving history,” she continues (v). More than just representing Moraga’s
evolution of thought as though it occurred in some kind of vacuum, however, the
additions reflect (upon) both the first edition itself and the critical reception of it and her
subsequent books, Last and Waiting. In the 1980s, critics eagerly received Loving as an
example of the fluidity of postmodern gender and racial identity (as in Donna Haraway’s
quick discussion of Moraga in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” where she cites both Loving
and Audre Lorde’s Sister Outsider/“Sister Outsider” as examples of a cyborg identity
[32-33]). And in 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera was perhaps even
more eagerly taken up in a similar vein. As Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, Sandra Soto, and
others have noted, Moraga and Anzaldúa quickly became the representative Chicana
lesbian writers, which had the double effect of making other Chicana lesbian writers less
visible and rendering Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s works as obvious evidence of
intersectional identity. Moraga kicks against this tendency in mainstream (i.e., non-Chicano, Latino or woman-of-color) scholarship to abstract and defang her work (and
Anzaldúa’s). (I discuss this issue more below.) One need not read deeply in Moraga’s
oeuvre to find examples of her attitude of resistance to cooptation by scholars who want
to use her works in ways she herself would not. This is perhaps nowhere more evident
than in the expanded edition of Loving.

Themes of family, identity, desire, and authenticity are present throughout
Moraga’s work, from Bridge to Xicana Codex, but, as the passage from the foreword to
the expanded edition of Loving shows, Moraga is interested in tracing a progression from
her early work to the present. And many of her readers follow suit, including Yvonne
Yarbro-Bejarano, who characterizes Moraga as having “turned” from a refusal to choose
in the early writing to a more solidly cultural nationalist, albeit queer, sensibility in later
writings. Indeed, it would be hard to deny (nor is it my intention to deny) that there is no change in Moraga’s politics or worldview from *Loving* to *Xicana Codex*. But to speak of a “turn” in Moraga’s work implies that her face is set in a new direction, that a new topic has been introduced, when in fact Moraga has returned to the same topics in her published writing over and over again, particularly family. (Indeed, the idea of “archeological” self-discovery, “digging up the dirt” (*Loving* iv), both in the sense of discovery and exposure of “dirty” secrets, is a trope Moraga employs throughout her work.) In “A Flor de Labios,” Moraga acknowledges her reiteration of tropes, saying that if she were to suddenly stop writing, “the small world who reads [her] work will say ‘Mira, see how she suffered the same questions her whole life’” (209).

As I mention above, I find this characterization of Moraga as having “turned,” or even “returned,” lacking, preferring instead the image of a spirograph: a children’s toy that uses plastic disks and pens to trace epitrochoids and hypotrochoids on paper. In theory, this process should result in perfect closed circuits that intersect with each other and orbit a central point that they never cross or touch. In practice, however, the spirograph can result in messy and lopsided designs. One’s center may not hold, or one’s paper may wrinkle, or one’s pen may stutter over a grain of sand under the paper. The advantage of a spirograph metaphor, then, is that it allows progression, but does not mandate it, nor does it show ahead of time whether things will meet back up. One can seem to be returning but end up in a new spot, and a variety of factors can influence whether the line holds at all. As Lisa Tatonetti comments, Moraga’s writings “function as story and theoretical testing ground” (229); what this means for my purposes is that each time Moraga returns to the topic of family, she is telling a story in order to arrive at new
insights about the nature of identity. In other words, the process of constructing and
shaping her autobiography functions as that “imaginative creation” Cornell identifies as
necessary for rethinking kinship, love, sex, and identity (Cornell 43). Sometimes this
process leads her to contradict things that she has said elsewhere, but she continues to
revise her stance according to her best lights, making her, perhaps in spite of herself,
anything but a simple representation of progression or of a single, contained ideology.
Because Moraga herself so closely links her personal biography to her work as an artist, I
examine both equally as expressions of a creative “I” that nonetheless expresses a “true
narrative,” as Moraga herself invites readers to do in “A Xicanadyke Codex of Changing
Consciousness” (Codex 4).

Soto puts her finger directly on the issue of symptomatic readings of Moraga’s
work: if Moraga is merely evidence of a theory of identity that evolves in a progressive,
linear fashion, as in the “homecoming” and “coming out” narratives, then we need only
acknowledge that she exists and move on. Yet this does not do justice to the work itself.
As Soto says, reading Moraga’s work as a more or less “smooth teleological narrative of
homecoming and enactment of racialized sexuality,” as Yarbro-Bejarano and others do,
can have the unintended consequence of making the meaning of her work seem self-
evident (Soto 17). What’s more, such assumptions reify the “home” that Moraga—in all
her authorial iterations—is coming back to. In Soto’s view, Moraga’s queer writings
function not only as evidence of Chicana feminist intersectionality, but as a generative
ground for analysis, particularly for scholars “challenging monological approaches to

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4 As Inga Clendinnen notes in her masterful book *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (1991), the codices
were painted books, representative of the Mexica “flor y canto” (213-16, 277). For someone like
Moraga, referring to the “codex” is a shorthand way to underline her connection to and
investment in the pre-Conquest indigenous American spiritual and artistic values.
identity,” since her work returns again and again to the task of “textualizing the dynamic and ever-messy relationship between racial formation and sexual identity” (25). In other words, Moraga changes her tune slightly on various topics as the years go on, revisiting things she has discussed before and adding new and sometimes contradictory insights, reading them in ways that her previous self could not have imagined.\(^5\)

Whether scholars discuss Moraga’s biography and work as a classic example of hybridity, serving as a bridge between lesbian, feminist, and Chicano worlds (usually citing earlier texts, like *Bridge* and *Loving*), or as the quintessential example of the way that race, ethnicity, and culture continue to matter in America (usually citing early and later texts), the sum total of her work points to a much more complex conclusion than any of these suggest. Poststructuralist feminists like Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick argue that Moraga demonstrates the constructedness of identity (Haraway), and cite Moraga’s insight that various oppressions cannot be ranked hierarchically (Sedgwick and Butler).\(^6\) Other scholars, for example postpositivist realists Paula M. Moya and Michael Hames-García, argue that Moraga’s work establishes the importance of identity categories, especially but not exclusively racial and cultural identity, and those categories’ political salience as coherent units around which to organize.\(^7\) According to these scholars, critics like Haraway and Butler get Moraga—and race—all wrong; “disrupting gender categories” and/or “conjuring away identity politics,” as Moya says

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\(^5\) In fact, one of the essays in *Xicana Codex*, “Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer,” Moraga reflects on the emerging trans* movements in the United States and how such a movement might have changed her own development as a young, butch-identified lesbian.

\(^6\) See above for Haraway; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 153n24; Sedgwick *Epistemology of the Closet* 33n32.

\(^7\) See also Emma Pérez on Chicano strategic essentialism in *The Lesbian Postmodern*. 
that Butler and Haraway (respectively) do, is politically counterproductive. Identity categories, both Moya and Hames-García argue, are not “essential” in the sense that they are inherent in the biological body, but they are real. These critics rightly insist that the material consequences of embodiment be acknowledged in theorizing race. However, the theorists with whom Moya and Hames-García, at least, seem to disagree most vehemently are not necessarily claiming that race does not matter or that it should be done away with as a category.

The theories of more poststructurally-oriented philosophers and theorists, like Haraway and Butler as well as Wendy Brown, for whom Hames-García in particular reserves special ire, are not undermining identity categories, but preserving a space for thinking about those categories in new ways. The terms used to describe and categorize us are materially relevant—they affect very real things like income, job and housing opportunities, one’s sense of community and belonging, and many other factors, including life expectancy—but it is crucial to maintain a space for rethinking those terms.

(Indeed, the history of race itself shows that, whether we make the mental space or not,

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8 Moya and Hames-García agree about many aspects of identity politics in Chicana/o studies, perhaps unsurprisingly; they have also published together as co-editors an anthology on identity, *Reclaiming Identity* (2000), and they edited, with Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya Mohanty, *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (2006).

9 In *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*, Hames-García, drawing on feminist Karen Barad’s theory of intra-action in “Posthumanist Performativity: How Matter Comes to Matter,” says, “Bodies do not have inherent meanings. Yet given the physical properties of bodies and the historical sediment of their intra-actions with cultural ideas and political-economic practices, one cannot attach just any meaning to any body. In other words, the body comprises something more than an inert, passive object on which people inscribe meaning […]” (61). In “How Real Is Race?” Hames-García objects to Wendy Brown’s take on identity politics in *States of Injury*. Although Hames-García’s criticisms of Brown’s methods are interesting, to me Brown’s real insight is to question whether the language of morality should be used interchangeably with the language of justice and politics, an issue that Hames-García does not address in his critique.
our ways of conceptualizing who belongs in which group and when are constantly shifting.) Moraga is fascinating as a subject of study precisely because she can be used to justify seemingly contradictory positions, depending on which book one cites, but also depending on which page within the same book one cites. This is as much a testament to the dissonance present in the work itself as to the varying agendas of the scholars writing about it. A careful and thorough reading of Moraga’s work, however, shows not incoherence, but a writer revising and refashioning her self-presentation.

Although a simple word count shows that the additions to the expanded edition of *Loving* have fewer references to familia/family, mother, motherhood, and daughters and more references to tribe, *cultura*, and blood compared to the earlier sections, my reading resists Moraga’s somewhat over-determined (not to say bossy) authorial guidance to map her progression from “lesbian feminist awakening” to “Chicana lesbian/woman-of-color consciousness” to “queer Chicana/o nationalist” in order to explore the possibility of non-linear progression in her work. The metaphor of the spirograph—turning, returning, revising, making the same shapes in different places, orbiting an invisible center—is a much more useful and accurate representation. As I say above, it allows for progression, but it complicates the idea that such progression is straight, clear, or simple.

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano allows for dissonance and contradiction to come through in her readings of Moraga’s work in *The Wounded Heart: Writings on Cherrie Moraga*, still the only monograph published to treat Moraga’s work exclusively. Yarbro-Bejarano productively examines the tensions in Moraga’s work that I have highlighted and examined in my own previous writing (Bolf 2013). She is a sympathetic reader, but she is also sensitive to the inconsistencies and reversals that a reading of Moraga’s prose
necessarily presents. However, she makes sense of these contradictions and reversals by tracing an evolution from *This Bridge Called My Back*, where she claims Moraga’s writing is characterized by a refusal to “choose,” to *The Last Generation*, where Moraga constructs her identity clearly as having chosen her Mexican/Chicana10 “side.” However, in part because Yarbro-Bejarano’s book is a collection of essays written over a number of years, and Yarbro-Bejarano does not, understandably, go back and completely revise or rewrite essays to adjust to new publications of Moraga’s work, *The Wounded Heart* does not delve deeply enough into the twists and turns that Moraga’s writing takes, and thereby misses some important revisions and completions, such as the evolution from essay to memoir of *Waiting in the Wings*, and the expansion of *Loving*.11 She cites an early version of *Giving Up the Ghost* in the chapter on that play, even though readers approaching Moraga now (and indeed, in the last 15-20 years) are much more likely to have encountered the edition published as part of a trilogy of plays in *Heroes and Saints and Other Plays*.

Although it may be the case that Yarbro-Bejarano’s conclusions would not have changed much even after taking into account the expanded and revised state of Moraga’s body of work (nor is it necessarily a matter of critical responsibility or integrity to do so), in my view it is worth investing the time in carefully attending to what Moraga actually says, not simply taking her word about what she says. This can be a difficult task with a writer who is still living and still producing prolifically—it is incredibly tempting to cite

10 The slash between the terms here is deliberate; Moraga continually shifts between “Chicana” and “Mexican” as descriptors, favoring the indigenous qualities of both identities.

11 Yarbro-Bejarano does list the expanded edition of *Loving* in her Works Cited, but she does not seem to do much with its expansions. Also, she uses the earlier essay version of “Waiting in the Wings” in her chapter on lesbian motherhood rather than the book-length memoir.
what Moraga says she says, rather than what she actually says. At the same time, it is easy to read her essays and poetry in isolation from each other, which is also limiting. However, I aim to follow the example of readers like Sandra Soto, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler by questioning the “surface level” of textual meaning as a given. In the sections that follow, I will draw on a wide range of Moraga’s works, both autobiographical and dramatic. Although they cover a large period of time, these selections will all be guided by the salience to the concept of “family” in them, a theme that resonates throughout Moraga’s body of work.

Before delving into Moraga’s work, however, it is necessary to make explicit the link I see between theories of identity and theories of family. Family is inherently intersectional. It is a locus not only of different identities, but different subjectivities, as separate people come together under a unifying banner (usually, but not always, genetic “blood” relationships). And yet it can operate as a unit; what is good for the family may not be good for individuals within the family. Furthermore, although typically not addressed directly as a factor in identity formation, the family has played a significant role in many theories of sexuality. Sigmund Freud famously locates in the nuclear family’s Oedipal drama the formative site of our neuroses, and Michel Foucault revisits this “repressive hypothesis” in *A History of Sexuality, Volume I*; he cites the family, along with the medical, educational, and psychological institutions, as one of the “devices of sexual saturation” that have proliferated since the 19th century, with their emphases on regulating sexuality and the family via marriage (Foucault 45). Feminists have, of course, theorized and questioned woman’s place in the heterosexual family romance for many decades; inherent in many of these critiques of the family is the notion that woman’s
identity is not fixed or biologically given. Furthermore, the nature of biological family contradicts the idea that racial, sexual, or class identities are “pure,” since families can contain a variety of sexual orientations, “racial” statuses, and sexes. “Family,” then, upsets notions of purity and essence as well as revealing at every turn its own constructed nature.

**Familia, Blood, Tribe**

There are three recurring themes in Moraga’s body of work that I would like to loosely link together: familia, blood, and tribe. These three themes function distinctly in each work, but they can all be linked under the banner of queer kinship that Moraga has been revisiting, refining, and developing since her earliest writings until the present day. Although Moraga is the first to point out the (hetero)sexism that has operated in the Chicano movement, she is also quick to note the shortcomings of (white) feminist criticisms of that movement that ignore the multiple ways that oppression operates (i.e., in terms of race, class, language, ethnicity, skin tone, gender expression, and sexuality as well as sex). Blood, in Moraga’s economy of symbology, is much more complex than a more poetic stand-in for the word “genetic,” as Sandra Hom’s article suggests. In Moraga’s work, blood is symbolic of birth, menstruation, and lesbian love. It is also a quasi-mystical link between genetically-related individuals that can, depending on the context, either supersede or be superseded by love. Finally, in her autobiographical work, developed through *Waiting in the Wings*, the expansion of *Loving in the War Years*, and the essays collected in *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, the emphasis on an ethno-historical notion of “tribe” that depends on the complex interaction between
culture, heredity, and intergenerational connections (and the related concept of *indigenismo*) represents another way that Moraga attempts to redefine family.

It would be impossible to discuss family in Moraga’s work without at least some gesture towards the pervasive trope of incest. Scholarly work, like that of Norma Alarcón in “Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” tends to celebrate Moraga’s son as part of her embodiment/enacting of her queer Aztlán/queer familia politics, while separating out the quasi-incestuous exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in *Loving* as quite another matter. Yet the taboo-breaking stance of *Loving*, for which Moraga is perhaps best well-known, weaves itself throughout much of her writing, including to some extent her writing about her son and her dramatic works. Moraga probes the accepted and acceptable limits of familial love; her work constantly tests the limits of identity, and returns over and over to the same themes. Mary Pat Brady discusses Moraga’s interruption of the “oedipal family romance” with her acknowledgment of mother-daughter desire. Because “[d]ominant family discourse, like the production of nationalist discourse, depends on a triadic circulation of desire that bypasses the mother-daughter relationship,” Brady says, Moraga’s assertion of mother-daughter desire “makes it possible to critique the violence, elisions, and discursive limitations of the family romance and thereby to confront ‘other social formations of violence’” (163). Far from being provocative for its own sake, then, incest is a complex discursive tool in Moraga’s body of work.

Although all of Moraga’s work engages with themes of family and desire, *Loving in the War Years* represents a special case because it was expanded and reissued nearly 25 years after its original publication, as I explain above. Therefore, it gives us a unique
insight not only into how Moraga’s point of view has changed, but also into how she wants her readers to frame her work. Moraga paints for her readers a picture of evolving *familia* that (re)turns to the indigenous, pre-capitalist, pre-Cortés past in order to draw strength for the future. The “evolved” position seems to throw its lot in with “race” over “sex,” deploying Chicano nationalist rhetoric about “nation” and “tribe,” while the introduction to the first edition declares its resistance to choosing Chicano or Anglo “sides.” However, while Moraga’s work does change and become reframed from one edition to another, it does not necessarily do so in exactly the way she says it does, nor in the ways that a retreat to essentialist/constructivist language can cover. After all, even Moraga’s own culturally nationalist family formations are very deliberately chosen and constructed.

In “We Fight Back With Our Families,” a section present in both editions of *Loving*, Moraga outlines why she believes “oppressed peoples,” specifically Chicanos, cling to the patriarchal institution of the family and then critiques this tendency, explaining feminism’s relevance to Chicanismo. This is an important response to the idea that racial solidarity trumps sex solidarity; more importantly, however, this passage refutes the notion that because race is constructed by societies, it is a “bad” or nonprogressive pole around which to identify and organize. As a great number of theorists and critics have taken pains to point out (including Drucilla Cornell, Paula Moya, and many others), the mere fact of race’s fictiveness does not negate its consequences in society. It may be “fictive,” but our invention of race figures it as biological, hereditary, and blood-related. Similarly, in this passage Moraga acknowledges the constructed versions of family while also explaining the attachment to “blood”—it’s
not just an internalization of the construction of race, but a creative response to the destructive and genocidal forces of racism, poverty, lynching, legalized discrimination, and suppression of language and culture.

Moraga explains: “[T]hey intend to see us dead. So we fight back, we think, with our families,” (Loving 101). But the crucial “refusal to examine all the roots of the lovelessness” in Chicano families, she continues, “is our weakest link and softest spot” (101). The language here gives pause: “weak link” in the context of the rest of the passage makes sense, but “softest spot” has a more ambiguous meaning. To have a “soft spot” means to feel indulgent towards something. It is also, relatedly, a point of vulnerability—a place to be entered or wounded. In addition, the “weak link” and “soft spot” are caused by a denial of “lovelessness” in families—surprising, since the stereotypical depiction of a nuclear family makes it the seat of unconditional love. Thus Moraga links homophobia and sexism—that “refusal”—to vulnerability. The image of a happy nuclear family, of successful reproduction of La Raza, seems to combat racism (Chicano Movimiento art confirms this, with its repeated forward-looking fathers, submissive but strong mothers, and clear-eyed, happy children; see Richard T. Rodriguez’s Next of Kin), but this complacency, this satisfaction with the ideal of heterosexual reproduction, is also a weakness, Moraga suggests.12 She describes in this passage how Chicanos have, perhaps unintentionally, taken what was a form of resistance (resisting genocide by valuing and defending the family) and used it to deploy oppressive heterosexist norms of behavior.

12 One thinks, of course, of Audre Lorde’s essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” printed in This Bridge Called My Back (1981).
Not only is family both constructed and blood-related in \textit{Loving}, but sexism and homophobia are directly linked to each other and to the family. “[L]esbianism, in any form, and male homosexuality which openly avows both the sexual and emotional elements of the bond, challenges the very foundation of la familia” she claims in \textit{Loving} (102). She then goes on to redefine family altogether as \textit{not} necessarily yoked to patriarchy.

Family is \textit{not} by definition the man in a dominant position over women and children. Familia is a cross-generational bonding, deep emotional ties between opposite sexes and within our sex. It is sexuality that involves, but is not limited to, intercourse or orgasm. It springs forth from touch, constant and daily...It is finding familia among friends where blood ties are formed through suffering and celebration shared. (102-103)

Lesbianism (and a certain kind of male homosexuality) challenges the foundation of “la familia”—a culturally specific Chicano organism—but, this passage seems to suggest, queer folk also form families based on “bonding...deep emotional ties...touch”: all things that do not necessarily inhere in genetic family. Moraga redefines “familia” as based not on genetics, but on love, sexuality and sex, and blurs the difference between “familia” and queer family. Significantly, she claims that “blood ties \textit{are formed}” by shared communal activities, like suffering and celebrating. Feast and famine, love, sex, and friendship, seem to be the things that Moraga counts as familia/family here.

In the second edition of \textit{Loving}, Moraga returns to examining the potential limits of the nuclear family unit, informed by the birth of her son and all of the experiences and adjustments to the notion of “queer family” that that experience brings. She critiques the laws and policies that have sprung up around adoption on two fronts: first, she argues that
non-biological parents do not have an equivalent connection to the child, referring to the “first primordial identification with the blood mother,” and therefore should not have equivalent rights as blood mothers. “It is not, in and of itself, homophobic to privilege the lesbian birth-mother’s relationship to the child” she claims (*Loving* 226 fn. 6). Second, in the context of the history of forced removal of “children of color and poor children” from their families by “Euro-American” authorities, the increasing number of (white) lesbian and gay adoptions of children of color “alarm[s]” Moraga because of the lack of regard for the biological connections of children and parents, the result, Moraga implies, of a perceived bias against gay parenting as well as blindness to structural racism on the part of adoptive parents (226 fn. 6). “There’s got to be more to making queer family than just picking up those children that poor women have been forced to discard,” she concludes, recommending that in terms of adoption society “go the harder road” and refuse to maintain the romantic fiction of the nuclear family in adopted families, and acknowledge the presence of birth parents (226 fn. 6). In this way, the adopted child can know “who her people are and where she came from” (226 fn. 6). Basically, Moraga argues that the movement that began as a way to defend lesbians against “homophobic ex-husbands and child welfare agencies” has become the agent of racist and neocolonialist forces, ignoring or actively opposing the “integration of a race and class analysis” in issues of adoption and queer co-parenting in order to defend the rights of non-biological parents.

What Moraga argues for in this footnote is, indeed, the “harder road” and represents another loop of the spirograph around “queer family.” From the seemingly all-inclusive confines of what “familia” is to the much firmer lines drawn to incorporate a “race and class analysis,” as she puts it in the footnote, Moraga is not afraid to revisit and
revise her previous positions, but neither does she negate what has come before. While Moraga identifies her concern with family throughout her work as “more ancestral” in her later writings in an interview with Adelina Anthony, it is clear that “ancestral” is not necessarily code for “traditional” (63). Indeed, in the same interview, Moraga claims:

I thought it was enough to simply reckon with your blood family as a queer, and then I asked what it meant to form queer familia, which was based on the values that came out of our blood familia. And then I thought about questions of this larger familia, like tribe or nation. (64)

Thus the values of the more “ancestral” concerns are an amalgamation of “blood” and “queer” family values. Additionally, in this passage, the shift between different voices and perspectives (“you” … “I” … “our”) points not to a rejection of a previous stance, but a larger inclusivity. However, at the same time, the neutral conjunctions (“and then”) also position Moraga as moving along a line of discovery, like someone following clues on a scavenger hunt. An “ancestral” concern with family, then, in part because of the impossibility of determining exactly what level of Native American “blood quantum” one might have as a Chicana or Mexican woman, turns out to be both a return and a progression, not to mention a project that will always be in the process of being discovered.13

Although the concept of a queer-inclusive Chicana/o “tribe” is present in early work, it gathers much more momentum over the years between the expansions of Loving, while mother-daughter relationships seem to fade in importance. Along with the more intense focus on “tribe” are ruminations on Chicanas/os’ position vis-à-vis the United

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13 The Last Generation even features a scene in which Moraga goes looking for her Native American ancestry, only to find that her Mexican cousin, Rudy, the keeper of meticulous family records, cannot name any specific Indian relatives, though the “Spanish surnames spill from his tongue…” (Last 130).
States of America, and the meaning of “nation.” Moraga points out, in the aptly-titled “Looking Back: Foreword to the Second Edition” of Loving, that her “intimate reflections on [her] mother...have gradually evolved, through the 90s, into broader reflections on Xicanos and Xicanas as ‘tribe’ and ‘nation,’” (iv). Indeed, in her play The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea, this preoccupation with tribe and nation is literally staged in a “Balkanized” post-apocalyptic America.

The first of the major differences between the first edition and the expanded edition of Loving in the War Years highlights the new preoccupation with tribe. 1983’s (untitled) dedication reads, “Para mis compañeras / especially for Barbara // for the duration.” In the expansion, it has been titled (“Dedication”) and changed to “Para mi familia de ‘scratch’14 .../ and all the rest of the tribe.” While the first dedication seems to emphasize chosen family (not to mention lesbian relationships—Barbara is the name of Moraga’s lover) over blood, the second mentions tribe and familia as it also destabilizes these seemingly obvious categories by adding “de scratch” to “familia” and separating that concept from “tribe.” That “compañeras” is replaced by “familia” is significant; compañeras refers exclusively to women, since in Spanish any mixed-sex group noun takes the male ending when there is an option to do so. It also implies some parity among the group, since it can refer to a variety of kinds of companions, like schoolmates, teammates, roommates, partners, and colleagues, depending on context, but never to the kind of hierarchical/asymmetrical relationship that exists between parents and children, for example. In the context of Loving as a whole, compañeras seems to refer to fellow queer women of color, engaged in the same “war” against homophobia, sexism, and

14 “Familia de ‘scratch’” is a quotation from Moraga’s first play (written after the first publication of Loving), “Giving Up The Ghost.”
racism that Moraga herself is.\textsuperscript{15} “Familia,” however, is both more inclusive and less specific than \textit{compañeras}. Its ending does not change depending on the sexes of the family members—all-male or all-female families could both be referred to as “la familia,” alongside the more common mixed-sex model of family, but it implies, if not direct genetic connection between people, at least the kind of intense bond that is formed in sight of a community and cannot be easily shaken—bonds like marriage, birth, and adoption. Thus Moraga moves the reader, from the very first pages of the expanded edition, away from the idea of feminist—even Chicana or woman-of-color feminist—solidarity between peers, and towards a culturally specific collective that includes children and adults, men and women. Yet both of these dedications have to do with the kinds of strong bonds that exist between people who are not necessarily genetically related.

The two instances of changing “cunt” to “chocha,” like the changed dedications, testify to Moraga’s desire as an author to have her work read as a linear progression, and that that progression be from sexual and cultural “coming out” to ancestrally-oriented \textit{indigenismo}. The first “cunt” change occurs at the beginning of one of her most widely-read essays, “A Long Line of Vendidas.” In this passage, Moraga begins a sub-section about the raced and gendered family dynamics of her home, “My Brother’s Sex Was White. Mine, Brown,” with an italicized journal entry relating a dream she had. In the 1983 edition, Moraga writes, “During the long difficult night that sent my lover and I to separate beds, I dreamed of church and cunt” (90, 1983). She then goes on to compare the

\textsuperscript{15} An anthology of Latina lesbian writing titled \textit{Compañeras} and featuring Gloria Anzaldúa, among others, was published in 1987; though not featured as a writer, it seems likely that Moraga was aware of it.
Catholic church to “the sensation of entering the vagina” of a “colored woman.” In the expanded edition, “cunt” becomes “chocha” (82, 2000), but the rest of the passage remains the same. The second instance of this significant word change occurs at the end of “A Long Line of Vendidas” in the sub-section titled “Epilogue: La Mujer Que Viene de La Boca,” where she writes:

Returning from the Latin American Women Writer’s Conference, I say to my friends as I drive down 91 South, ‘The mouth is like a cunt’ […] It’s as if la boca were centered on el centro del corazón, not in the head at all. The same place where the cunt beats. 

And there is a woman coming out of her mouth.
Hay una mujer que viene de la boca. (142, 1983)

In the expanded edition, the first use of “cunt” is changed to “chocha,” and the second to “vagina.” Further, Moraga revises her Spanish to the more grammatical “saliendo de” instead of “viene de.”

“Cunt” has had resonances of 1970s (white) feminist movement, when some feminists recuperated what had been a slur or an insult to empower women to know, love, and be in control of their own bodies. “Chocha,” on the other hand, sheds these Anglo feminist connotations and adds a sense of “insiderness,” since Moraga is writing primarily in English to a mainly academic audience, who must know this slangy term for female genitalia in order to understand, or spend the time to look it up. As a result, because it is a Spanish word widely used throughout the Spanish-speaking Americas, it lines Moraga up with the Chicano/Mexican “side” of herself more than the

16 Spanish makes more of a distinction between “go/leave” (salir) and “come” (venir) than English does; in Spanish, one usually speaks from one’s own perspective. Thus, “venir de” implies that the woman “coming out of the mouth” approaches from elsewhere; “salir de” implies that the woman comes out from within.

white/feminist “side.” Contrasted with the intention to speak to “both sides” of herself, Chicano and Anglo, declared in the Preface to the first edition (*Loving* xiii), the change from “cunt” to “chocha” seems to nullify this intention. However, it is actually recasting the “sides” of herself from Anglo/Chicana (and “an embarrassment” to both communities as a lesbian) to lesbian/Chicana (*Loving* xiii). This shift reflects, perhaps, a more established position within the Chicana/o (academic) community; *Loving in the War Years*, upon re-publication, was hailed by South End Press, its publisher, as “a classic in the…Chicano canon since its 1983 release” (“Loving”). Similarly, the subtle change from “venir” to “salir” reflects Moraga’s more established position as a speaker of Spanish.

If read out of context, Moraga’s interest in “nation” can make her seem quite essentialist or even crudely nationalist. In one section of the expanded edition of *Loving*, Moraga claims, “Today I am writing Nation. It is not a dirty word” (188, italics hers), and “I have chosen ‘nation’ over prescribed Euro-American lesbian ethics about motherhood […]” (205). Some of the original parts of *Loving* have multiple references to the force Moraga felt it necessary to use to be a part of Chicana/o community; for example, she claims that because of her light skin and lack of Spanish fluency, she had to “bulldoze [her] way back into a people” (*Loving* 87). However, in “Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in América,” an essay added in the expanded edition of *Loving*, she declares that immigrants from Mexico “may be calling themselves ‘Mexican,’ but their blood is speaking Indigenous American. And the shape of the head, the nose, the cheekbones, the shade of skin is talking back” (*Loving* 163). The naming of physiognomy is not a metaphor, not figurative. It is poetic, but Moraga means “brownness” quite literally here. The gay, Mexican/Chicano father of her son was, she tells us, chosen for his “brains and
dark beauty” (*Waiting 39). *Lo mexicano*, then, is something transmitted genetically, in the “blood,” and the facial and bodily features that Moraga identifies as Mexican (read: indigenous) are favored over the “white” features.18

The apparent essentialism embedded in this cultural nationalist stance can seem to put Moraga with strange bedfellows. In *The Fragmenting Family*, for example, British philosopher and professor Brenda Almond argues both for the importance of defining “family” in a biological sense, and against the involvement of the state in family arrangements. Family, she claims, is “a mysterious genetic entity that binds us in our short span of individual existence to our ancestors and to our successors” (*Fragmenting* 1, italics mine). Almond goes on to blame a combination of social policy and medical reproductive advancement for the destruction “of family structures in ways that are often unforeseen and unintended” (19). She also claims that marriage forms a “quasi-biological bond” between the parties involved that “gains concreteness and substance by legal and social recognition” (40). Although such a claim could easily be used to curtail the right to divorce, the idea of “quasi-biological bonds” between people seems like rich ground for thinking about queer, non-patriarchal family structures, and though Almond’s arguments are problematic for a number of reasons, not least because she places blame on feminism and homosexuality for the “fragmentation” of the nuclear, patriarchal family rather than

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18 Moraga’s stance here is obviously more complex than the sort of racist “genetics” and eugenicism of the turn of the 20th century, and is not a simple deployment of Noble Savage trope, not least because Moraga herself is well aware of that history. The lauding of brownness flies in the face of dominant Anglo standards of beauty, and Moraga is not alone in deploying this “glamorization” of type as a way to affirm and value a part of one’s heritage that has historically been denied and suppressed.
questioning the viability of the construct itself, the question of the role of the state in private life is an enduring one. Drucilla Cornell’s work on kinship, too, emphasizes the importance (if not the determinism) of biology and race, and questions what the role of the state should be in terms of the freedom of the individual. What all three—Almond, Cornell, and Moraga—have in common is their sense that what Cornell would call “formal equality feminism” largely has not addressed the complexity of the issues raised by queer family, adoption, and the role of the state in marriage and family structures.

My reading of Moraga in conjunction with Cornell and Almond suggests two things. First, Moraga sophisticatedly revisits and reviews her previous stances on the family, spirographically subjecting her previous views and beliefs to continual friction and revision. Despite her deployment of essentialist language, “family” is still very much a construction—evidenced by the fact that she continues to return to it and talk about it over and over in her work, always in slightly different ways. For example, in a footnote to some of the expanded material in Loving, Moraga quotes herself in Waiting in the Wings as saying “Blood matters.” But this is not the full quotation, and in the footnote it is used to prove an entirely different, almost opposite, point as the one it was making in Waiting. In the footnote, in the context of explaining why she ultimately leaves her white lover, she says, “‘Blood matters,’ as I wrote in Waiting in the Wings […]” (Loving 226).

However, the full passage from Waiting in the Wings is this:

There is no accounting for […] what finally makes a family, except love. I remain awed by this mystery of how love and blood and home and history and desire coalesce and collide to construct a child’s sense of self and family. I know blood quantum does not determine parenthood any more

19 This is to leave aside Almond’s questionable assumption that the state of marriage and the family is deteriorating from some whole and happy idyll—an idyll that was probably never widespread enough to be taken as the norm.
than it determines culture. Still, I know blood matters. It just doesn’t matter more than love. *(Waiting 125)*

In the original passage, Moraga has been explaining her ambivalent feelings about her lover, Ella’s, whiteness and Moraga’s own reluctance to make Ella the full legal guardian of Rafael, Moraga’s son; “es la cultura,” she says *(Waiting 91)*. Yet by the end of the passage, love has won out—at least temporarily—over blood. In the footnote in *Loving*, this lover’s whiteness and the “cultural imperialism” that goes with it will be the reason Moraga gives for their break up; but the point of “blood matters” in this later context is to act as a springboard for an argument about the complicated politics of adoption when the patriarchal, heterosexual family unit is not a given. The self-quotation in *Loving* shows a clear self-fashioning, which is, of course, what writers do, but it is also clear that Moraga’s is a queer family image that keeps being reconstituted along different lines; as her story moves through time, so, too, do her theoretical positions shift.

The second conclusion to draw from these strange bedfellows is that the “essentialist” and “social constructivist” aspects of her theory are indelibly linked, rather than opposed, to each other. It might seem that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theory of “strategic essentialism” applies here, but I contend that that misses the point. It is not quite that Moraga is being strategic, deploying an essentialist viewpoint that she finds problematic in order to mobilize behind a group identity. It is not that blood=essentialism and queer family=construction, nor is it the case that Moraga thinks these group identities are necessary but limiting. *Cultura*, race, and even sexuality are something one works at as well as something to which one must be born. As a self-identified “half breed,” positioned in a liminal space between “white” (which she says her Chicano family told
her to “run with”) and “Chicana/Mexican/indígena” (which she claims as an adult), Moraga shows both the continuing power of identity as well as the constructed nature of categories like race. She can claim “Chicana” because of her blood relationship with her mother, but she also must build that identity around her through language, community, and praxis.

Though it is impossible to walk away from even the most cursory reading of *Loving* without a sense that, as Moraga says, “blood matters,” if nothing else because her Mexican family constitutes her “ticket” back to a “people,” still, a careful reading of certain passages shows Moraga’s refusal to conform to anybody’s expectations about her identity. For example, in one of the expansions of *Loving*, Moraga lambasts the “academic appropriation of Gloria Anzaldúa’s ‘border’ [which has] metamorphosed into a kind of 1990s postmodern homeland for all displaced peoples of mixed blood and mixed affinities” (*Loving* 177). This might initially read as a cultural nationalist riposte to postmodern literary critics abstracting ethnic studies—how dare they dislocate Anzaldúa’s border, trivialize it? However, a close reading reveals a more complex and difficult tone than that; it could be sarcastic, affectionately tongue-in-cheek, “straight,” or bitter. Of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she says, “[it] gave all of us something to think about. And write about. And teach about. And use as titles for conferences. And think and write some more about” (*Loving* 177). Here, the proliferation of sentence fragments and the insertion of “And use as titles for conferences” suggests a monotonous

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20 In *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*’s “The Salt That Cures: Remembering Gloria Anzaldúa,” Moraga addresses the rift between the two women that arose near the end of publishing *This Bridge*. Besides “[walking] different roads as Xicana scribes,” Moraga relates the accusation of plagiarism that Anzaldúa leveled at her in 1984 (*Codex* 125). This essay is dated as “2009”; Anzaldúa passed away in 2004.
checklist, a typical example of academics latching on to an idea and then squeezing it dry. To Moraga’s mind, the terms “borderlands” and “border,” in academia at least, have lost their specificity at the U.S.-Mexico (even more specifically, U.S.-Texas) border, and have become abstracted to any site of “mixed blood and mixed affinities”—a more comfortable space than the “oh-so-70s Nation of Aztlán, the realization of which would mandate armed conflict” (177). The tone of that “oh-so-70s” modifier is especially hard to gauge. Clearly, Moraga is repelled by appropriations of Anzaldúa’s theory that leave behind her very specific positioning of the text in the literal U.S.-Texas borderlands.21 But at what or whom is the sarcasm in that hyphenated phrase, “oh-so-70s,” directed? Because she is an outspoken critic of homophobia and sexism within el Movimiento, and given the ambivalent realization of the Nation of Aztlán in her play “The Hungry Woman,” it is difficult to believe that Moraga is advocating a straightforward taking up of arms by Chicanos against the United States government along the lines of 1970s cultural nationalist models. Moraga is also too sensitive to issues of social violence and injustice—poverty, racism, cultural devaluation and disappearance—to believe that armed conflict is an end in itself. In the end, then, neither the 1970s Nation of Aztlán nor postmodern literary and cultural critics come out looking very good in her analysis. No matter who offers the rubric for assembling family, then, Moraga submits it to constant critique and revision.

Philosopher Sabrina L. Hom argues convincingly that Moraga’s figuration of race, sex, and kinship in Loving helps us avoid the “sterile standoff in feminist studies between essentialism and social construction” (Hom 420). She close-reads Loving using

21 As Anzaldúa says in the Preface to the first edition, however, the borderlands are also “psychological…sexual…[and] spiritual,” and these are “not particular to the Southwest” (19).
Irigaray as a theoretical framework for interpreting Moraga’s account of her relationship with her brown mother as a light-skinned Chicana woman. Irigaray’s notion of “blood as a resilient material principle of connection and ethical implication that exceeds patriarchal determination and binarism” informs Hom’s reading of Moraga, while Moraga’s account of her attachment, exile, and return to her mother via the “poverties” of race and lesbianism helps Hom recuperate Irigaray in light of her “disappointing” stance on race (420, italics Hom’s). Blood, in Hom’s reading, is necessarily material but not necessarily genetic. She borrows the example of blood donation from Kath Weston to illustrate this: blood donation resists both racism (since blood can be donated between races) and “one-world utopianism” (since only the right type of blood can be received by a body) (Hom 424). This is precisely the tension and ambiguity with which Moraga uses the trope of family throughout her work, not just in Loving.

If Moraga is constructing familia as she goes, then the unifying thread is always blood. In Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood, Moraga opens and concludes with images and references to blood, both of which are also complexly tied to the idea of family. “Growing up, the we of family was always defined by blood relations. We meant family” she begins (Waiting 17). Yet by the Epilogue of the memoir, reflecting on the state of her own queer, multi-racial family unit, she muses that “there is no accounting for what finally makes a family, except love…Still, I know blood matters. It just does not matter more than love” (Waiting 125). In the context of Waiting, Rafael (blood) is the cause of the disruption in Moraga’s relationship with her girlfriend Ella, but he is also what brings them together under the rubric of “love.” Still, Moraga refers, in the ambiguous epilogue of the memoir, to the “custody battle” between Rafael and Ella
over “mami”—a battle that takes place after Ella has moved out of the home she initially shared with Moraga and Rafael. In this scene, Rafael jumps on Moraga and says “My mami,” to which Ella replies, “My girlfriend” (*Waiting* 125). This scene demonstrates Moraga’s refusal to come to a neat conclusion about what queer family can, should, or does mean at the same time that it exemplifies the tension Moraga perceives between the concerns of being a Chicana and a mother and the concerns of white lesbian feminism. Indeed, with the expanded edition of *Loving* in mind, the “custody battle” seems prophetic, since Moraga will frame her breakup with Ella in terms of what is best for Rafael as the literal embodiment and continuation of (queer) *Raza*; Rafael’s father, as I mention above, was chosen specifically for his “dark beauty” and queerness, and Ella, as a white woman (albeit a lesbian one who speaks a Spanish “that don’t make a fool outta her”), cannot pass on to Rafael the *cultura* that Moraga has worked so hard for him to have (*Waiting* 39).

As Hom points out, though blood obviously encompasses what we would call genetic ties as well as “bodies in relation” and the “nurturing and constitutive relation of gestation,” it also “refers to shared culture or solidarity between persons of shared ethnicity, for example” (Hom 423). In Moraga’s work, “blood” carries both of these senses simultaneously and sometimes indistinguishably. Love, in spite of what Moraga says in *Waiting*, is *not* enough to form family by the time she has written the expansion of *Loving*, but blood is, even if the presence of genetic or cultural ties does not mandate familial connection. That is why Ella, in spite of her Spanish-speaking abilities, her queerness, and her role in Rafael’s early life, cannot simply carry on the mission of
raising queer *Raza* that Moraga has begun with Rafael, because she does not have the right “blood quantum,” as Moraga sometimes calls genetic lineage.

In *Waiting*, Rafael is not only associated with the primacy of blood, but also with the blurring of lines between desire for a lover and love between family members. After he is born, Moraga’s sister tells her she will never forget the smell of birth. Moraga comments, “I didn’t tell her how close the scent came to that lesbian secret, of how close women come to birth each time we make love to one another and mean it. It is a lesbian sex-smell. A mother-smell. A mother-lover, a mother-fucked smell” (*Waiting* 68). This is one of the many places where Moraga makes explicit the connection in her economy of love between sex, family ties, and blood. Part of what creates “familia de scratch” is, undoubtedly, sex, but not just *any* sex. It must be sex where the parties “mean it.” That is why the smell of birth is linked to the smell of sex; rather than maintain a strict line of separation between motherhood and sex, Moraga not only points out that they are both centered around the vagina, but she also proposes that lesbian love is directly linked to maternal love. This juxtaposition of something sacred (mother love) with something supposedly taboo and “secret” (lesbian love) destabilizes both categories, clearing the way for redefinition of both.

Like blood, which is shown to be both genetic and not, and familia, which is both constructed and inherited, “tribe” follows a logic of both/and. Moraga’s deployment of “tribe” can seem at first to be a retreat into Chicano nationalism, or to be taken increasingly literally as the years go on; after all, in *Loving*, Moraga reports that when she and Ella break up, Ella accuses her of thinking she is “an Indian” (202)—an accusation that Moraga goes on to claim and corroborate, even as she acknowledges “I don’t know
how much Indian I got in me…[or] if the Indian people on my mother’s side just gave it all up…” (204). The word “tribe” itself alludes to *indigenismo* and seems connected to a rather essentialist notion of hereditary race and culture. Actually it is, like everything else with Moraga, being constructed and reformulated “in real time.” Moraga simultaneously believes deeply in these concepts but is also skeptical of their ability in and of themselves to save us. She is skeptical of any system that is not constantly questioning itself and making space for its downtrodden.

In “Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe,” an essay in her second autobiographical book, *The Last Generation*, Moraga develops her critique of both the racism and colonialism of the white feminist movement and the cultural nationalism of the Chicano movement. Riffing on the idea of Queer Nation, the description of whose members distinctly recalls neo-Nazi skinheads or Hell’s Angels, Moraga says that what is needed is a Queer Aztlán—a “new nationalism” that embraces its *jotería* (*Last* 147).

Moraga frames the urgent need for a queer Aztlán as a response not only to racism, (hetero)sexism and cultural imperialism, but also to environmental degradation and lack of control/sovereignty over the land and work environments in which many Chicanos’ live (*Last* 164). Two pages further on, Moraga links queer Aztlán to the revision of the Anglo-European, middle-class, nuclear family structure: “‘[t]ribe,’ based on traditional models of Native Americans, is an alternative socioeconomic structure that holds considerable appeal for those of us who recognize the weaknesses of the isolated patriarchal capitalist family structure” (*Last* 166). Thus tribe is cultural, political and familial. Indeed, politics is never far from the surface with Moraga; as Soto says, Moraga’s “biography is never meant to be so ‘auto’ that it is not collective” (Soto 19). It
is clear in this essay that identity—Chicana/o or queer—is not enough in itself for revolution or liberation, and that a revision of family structures (or nationalism, or blood ties) can never be non-political.

In *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, Moraga shows the complexity of “tribe” and “Aztlan” as salvific ideas. Medea is an indigenous woman who has been exiled to Tamoanchán (present-day Phoenix; now a no-man’s-land for Aztlan’s exiles) in a post-apocalyptic United States that has been divided into separate sovereign nations based on race. Medea’s non-indigenous husband, Jasón, remains in Aztlan, while their son, Chac-Mool/Adolfo, lives with Medea. Since Chac-Mool represents Jasón’s claim to land in Aztlan, but only if he is physically with Jasón, Medea kills Chac-Mool before he can choose to join his father and legitimate Jasón’s presence in Aztlan. It is an act of revenge against not just Jasón but the entire patriarchal structure that has made her, a former revolutionary fighting for the existence of Aztlan, an outcast from its borders. The play emphasizes over and over that patriarchal family structures are doomed to be oppressive, no matter on whose behalf they are deployed, echoing Moraga’s insight from “Queer Aztlan” that cultural nationalists must listen to their jotería, and her skepticism about the likelihood of that. When the “revolutionaries [tell] the women, put down your guns and pick up your babies” and then “[throw] out their…[q]ueers of every color and shade and definition,” the wise grandmother character of the play, Mama Sal, knows that the revolutionaries are “just like the Gringo [Anglo] and the Gachupin [Spanish] before them” (*Hungry Woman* 24).

Medea, in spite of her incarceration in an insane asylum throughout the “present” of the play, is not crazy. She is depressed and she is trapped in exile, but the play does not
present her as outside of her senses, nor does it show her as having betrayed her son by sacrificing him. The final scene is a reversal of the “pietà” image in which Medea drugs Chac-Mool; Chac visits his mother (as a ghost or as a real person is unclear, since only Medea is active on stage at this point\textsuperscript{22}) and gives her herbs to drink, as she did for him. Whether either of them “really” dies, this play complicates the idea that blood (in this case, Jasón’s blood) ties are or predetermined, unchangeable, or “pure” of influence from the patriarchal structures surrounding them. For example, Luna, Medea’s lover, is a much more tender and loving mother-figure to Chac-Mool than Medea ever is. At a point in the play, Luna says to Medea, “I always thought that if Jasón had felt even the smallest part of what I’ve come to feel for Chac-Mool, that he never would’ve let him go…He would’ve forced you to choose” (17, Act I Sc 2). Luna echoes what Moraga reiterates over and over in her autobiographical work: family, like love, is a choice, not a given.

Destabilizing Family Love in Giving Up The Ghost

Moraga’s play \textit{Giving Up The Ghost} shows the complexity of trying to declare the “truth” of basic identifications through its portrayal of its three main characters’ genders. In this three-actor play, Corky, a pre-teen, \textit{cholo}-style tomboy (a younger version of Marisa, a Chicana artist), relates how she learned that women and men are basically different from one another through two monologues in which she narrates memories of her past. The monologues deal with Corky’s witnessing of and participation in the molestation of a three-year-old neighbor girl, and a janitor’s rape of Corky at her school.

\textsuperscript{22} Patricia Ybarra reads Chac-Mool as actually murdered, returning as a ghostly presence to assist Medea’s suicide, while Catríona Rueda Esquibel reads Chac as not “really” dying and returning to rescue his mother from the asylum. It is impossible to determine from the text what actually happens, and much would depend on the staging of these scenes. Chac says he is taking Medea “home.”
Both of these events are explicitly linked to Corky’s identification against and attraction to women, which in turn is linked to the idea of what women basically are.

In the former incident, Corky and her male friend, Tury, lure their three-year-old Anglo neighbor, Chrissy, into a shed. Corky is the one who calls Chrissy over, but it is Tury who actually touches “her little fuchi fachi,” after which Corky immediately feels “like a jerk” and “tonta [stupid]” (*Heroes* 10). Corky leads up to this monologue about molesting Chrissy by stating that at the time of the incident, she felt she was “big ‘n’ tough ‘n’ a dude / in my mind I had all their freedom / the freedom to see a girl kina / the way you see / an animal you know?” (8). But she immediately admits that she “never could / quite / pull [being a boy] off” (8). The knowledge of her femaleness is “deep down inside,” and for the second time in this monologue, Corky makes a parallel between being a woman and being an animal. For Corky here, and later in the rape scene, being a woman is related closely to animal instincts, reproduction, and sex: things that are considered basic and biological “proof” of gender, but that Corky upends even as she acknowledges their power.

Likewise, in the monologue about the janitor’s rape in Scene 10, we finally learn that that incident is what convinces Corky/Marisa that she is “a hole”; in other words, the rape convinces her of the basic biological fact of her female body, a notion that Corky has been playing with, subverting, and challenging throughout the preceding scenes (29). In the rape scene, the tables have been completely turned on Corky, whom we have already seen assume, if uncertainly, the male privilege necessary to treat a body as property. Gender identity, sexuality, and desire are complexly tied together in this monologue and cannot be easily untied. They are linked by the notion of the taboo:
lesbianism and incest are both verboten and unfit for polite discussion in the Mexican Catholic household that *Giving Up The Ghost* articulates. This tight tying together undermines easy conclusions about lesbianism or incestuous desire, or what Eve Sedgwick might call a minoritizing or universalizing view of sexuality (as Sedgwick’s own project undermines a view that takes either of those as absolutes).

Because of the literally patriarchal cast of Corky’s rape compared to the idealized love that Amalia and Corky’s mother represent, it would be tempting to read *Ghost* as endorsing a binary viewpoint about men and women that show women as comforting, warm, kind, and loving, and men as exploitative: women and therefore women’s love is less exploitative, is warm and comforting and sacred, while the love of men is unsatisfying at best, exploitative and violating at worst. However, the presence of Alejandro in the play, though he is never embodied on the stage, undermines this easy assumption. Alejandro’s existence is a source of consternation to Marisa, who is jealous and mistrustful of Amalia’s attachment to her former lover, since Marisa has, she told us, been abandoned by straight women before—beginning perhaps, with her mother (*Heroes* 8, 14-15, 17). As the play progresses, however, we learn that Amalia’s relationship with Alejandro was itself a queering of heterosexual male-female norms. In Scene Six, Amalia delivers a monologue about Alejandro, the “one man” she has ever been “crazy over”:

“Once he said that with me he felt as though he were ‘a heart that knew no sex.’ No man-woman, he meant, only heat and a heart and that even a man could be entered in this way” (*Heroes* 19). This characterization of Alejandro’s sexuality will link him in the reader’s/viewer’s memory to Corky/Marisa in the rape monologue in Scene Ten. Here, Marisa ends the scene by comforting Corky and saying “how lucky [men] were, that they
could release all that stuff, all that pent-up shit from the day, through a hole that nobody could get into” (29). Thus being “open” or penetrable is at first shown as traumatic and dangerous, but within the space of a few pages redefined to be a sexual, non-binary culmination of love; Corky’s experience with the janitor’s “entering” is of violation, trauma, and betrayal, while Amalia’s relationship with Alejandro leads to something beyond “reversal” of gender roles to a kind of transcendence. Being vulnerable is not an either/or proposition in this play, but a matter of both/and. It brings pain and joy, is both necessary and dangerous.

Two scenes in particular bring up the taboo of incest and link it to sexuality in two different, almost opposite, ways. During the monologue describing her rape in “Giving Up The Ghost,” Corky tells us how she acted submissively and obediently towards her rapist, following his orders even as she knew that something was wrong: “still all polite como mensa [like a dummy]!” (27). She regrets her compliance later, but at the time, she describes herself as acting automatically, almost instinctively. In response to her whimperings of “¿Dónde ‘stás papi?” confusing her rapist with her absent father, the janitor finally tells her “Soy tu papá” (28). Then he penetrates her, as she compares the pain that this forcing causes in “what was suppose[d] to be a hole” to her earlier play with her cousin Norma “I remembered [it] had to be [a hole] / cuz Norma had found it once wet ‘n’ forbidden / ‘n’ showed me too how wide and deep like a cueva hers got” (28). The pseudo-incest of the rape (which in one way is not a breaking of taboos at all—Corky is being submissive and polite, passively resisting his advances) is compared with the real near-incest of cousins exploring their bodies and testing their attractions (this is a
real taboo broken, as Corky’s mother puts a stop to it as soon as she finds out about it). The rape monologue is odd as well as tragic and moving. The wordplay on the colloquial use of familial terms like “mama,” “mami,” and “papi” in sexual contexts is underlined by Corky’s own sexual attachments to her cousin and the anger that results when that cousin rejects her for being raped. The rape is the culmination of patriarchal norms about women’s bodies—always possessable, violable.

In the part of the monologue in Scene 10 directly preceding the rape section, Corky voices a common assumption that something has gone “wrong” when a child does not inhabit the “correct” gender, and simultaneously queers that logic by being herself a queer, transgressively gendered character. Corky relates more of her relationship with her cousin Norma—her “first woman” (Heroes 14)—as well as reporting on Norma’s son, Jason. In the midst of bitterly saying that she’d still like “to beat [Norma’s] butt” for dumping her after her rape, Corky affectionately suspects Norma’s four-year-old “blond-haired blue-eyed” son Jason of being “a little joto [fag]…primping all over the place…what goes around comes around…puro gringo [all white boy/Anglo]” (26). The ambiguous phrase “what goes around comes around” raises a number of questions. It seems that it is both race/culture (“puro gringo”) and sexuality (“little joto”) that are transmitted inter-generationally, if not genetically—but how? Are Norma’s adolescent “sins” with her female cousin being visited upon her children in the form of homosexuality? Is Jason’s whiteness and distance from lo mexicano what undermines his masculinity (a masculinity whose performance Corky has almost mastered), or is it his

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23 Also, see Catrióna Rueda Esquibel on early girlhood friendships/comadrazgo as a site for lesbian feelings and/or a space for resistance of patriarchal norms: With Her Machete In Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians, especially Chapter 5, “Memories of Girlhood: Chicana Lesbian Fictions.”
sexual orientation? Is Norma’s effeminate Anglo son a form of cosmic payback for her emotional coldness and lack of support? Is her lack of support itself a sign of her agringación, along with her white “hubby ‘n’ kids” (26)? These questions do not receive answers but contribute to the complexity around the themes of incestuous and lesbian desires.

Amalia’s and Norma’s conflation with Corky’s/Marisa’s mother also underlines the interconnectedness of sexuality and family. All three characters are portrayed by the same actress, but there are no stage directions to indicate their differentiation; the viewer (or reader) must be paying extremely close attention to Marisa’s and Corky’s monologues to understand what is happening. Additionally, Amalia is a generation older than Marisa, and although she is also Chicana, she came to California from México; she is not pocha, as Marisa identifies herself (Heroes 31). In the final lines of the play, Marisa reflects on Amalia during love-making: “I’d see…[her face] turn this real deep color of brown and olive, like she was cooking inside. Tan linda [so beautiful]. Kind” (34). This connects Amalia even more closely to Corky’s mother, who makes being “cath-lic” feel “real warm ‘n’ dark ‘n’ kind” (14). Depth, darkness, warmth, and kindness: these are the qualities associated with mothers, lovers, and a general sense of security in this play.

Perhaps the main purpose that the articulation of incestuous desires serves in Moraga’s work is to resist the normalization of desire. By juxtaposing two opposing emotions, like the violation associated with rape and romantic love between cousins, Moraga shows that they are related, if not directly. Similarly, aligning Amalia with Norma and with Corky’s mother suggests that Marisa’s/Corky’s love for all of them is linked together. This undermines easy conclusions about what constitutes “right” family
formations and what counts as legitimate desire. A logic of “both/and” is at work in the close contact between trauma and joy in Corky’s monologues, destabilizing normative understandings of family and shaking the reader (or viewer) out of what she thinks she knows about how love works. Normalization has, of course, been a theme in Judith Butler’s work for many years. She considers the double-edged sword of state sanction of certain relationships in her essay “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” where she points out that it is generally “not widely recognized as a problem” that the state’s sanction of same-sex marriage “might result in the intensification of normalization […]” (Undoing Gender 104). Looking to French society as an example, she also points out that “fears about immigration” are linked, however subconsciously, to “desires to regulate nonheterosexual kinship” (121). As my readings above show, these fears and desires had already been broached and explored many years before Butler was writing by Cherríe Moraga.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to show how the contradictions, reversals, returns, and loops in Cherrie Moraga’s conception of *familia* destabilize traditional notions of family as they simultaneously sketch out the framework of a queer, decolonized future. Through the tropes of blood, tribe, and incestuous desire, Moraga continuously redraws the boundaries around familia. Speaking of Moraga’s play, *Heroes and Saints*, that concludes with “The People” (including audience members, potentially) burning down the pesticide-saturated agricultural fields, Mary Pat Brady comments, “It is not just the fields that burn—so do institutions such as familia and concepts such as the body” (Brady 171). Indeed, part of Moraga’s revolutionary agenda entails periodically
burning what has been laid out before—including what she herself has made—in order to return to it anew, the same but different.

At the beginning of this chapter, I sketched out a “debate” that scholars generally have about Moraga: either as the representative of a postmodern, hybrid identity or as “the” representative Chicana lesbian, evidence of the importance of personal identity in literature. I hope that the takeaway from this chapter is not that these critics are wrong-headed or doing some sort of disservice to Moraga or her work; rather, my intention is to clarify that the sheer complexity of Moraga’s *oeuvre* makes it necessary to specify which “Moraga” we are dealing with. If Moraga is evidence of anything, then, it is of the complicated nature of identity formation and the multiple factors—not least, the family—that contribute to that formation. There is much nuance in this work, nuance that can get lost if the main purpose of reading is to make Moraga a handy preamble to a separate manifesto.
CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude briefly by bringing in for examination two recent cultural texts: one a rhetorical flourish from the highest court in the United States in a widely-celebrated (if controversial) ruling, and the other a popular indie song from a Latino band situated in one of the major centers of immigration in the country, Los Angeles, California. These two examples demonstrate dramatically and immediately the vital importance of an intersectional view of the family. They could both be characterized as politically liberal, and both certainly see themselves on the side of liberatory politics and social justice. However, both texts rely on evocations of a primal, sacrosanct “family” that should not be violated as a rhetorical strategy that legitimates previously illegitimate identities. Ironically, though both of these texts work to accomplish liberatory ends (i.e., legal same-sex marriage and immigration reform), they accomplish these ends by relying on concepts that do not challenge heteronormative and conservative family values.

In the recent, historic Supreme Court decision, Obergefell v. Hodges, the United States Supreme Court decided that marriage is a basic right of all Americans, regardless of their sexual orientation. In the majority opinion, after twenty-seven and a half pages summarizing not only all the cases in lower courts leading up to the Obergefell case, but the history of marriage itself, Justice Anthony Kennedy closed with this paragraph:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies
a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right. The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reversed. 

*It is so ordered. (Obergefell 28)*

Jubilation on social media about this decision (or consternation, depending on one’s social contexts) was immediate, and for the celebrators, this paragraph, in particular, was shared over and over. Many applauded Kennedy’s stirring defense of the institution from the common charge that allowing same-sex marriage devalues marriage as a whole, and websites as diverse as the *Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Slate, the New York Times, the Washington Post,* and many, many others, large and small, published posts designed to make sharing this paragraph on social media easy. The decision was about marriage, but as the first sentence indicates, the implications of the decision stretch into the terrain of the “family”—not simply a descriptive, concrete noun, but an abstract principle that can hold its own in a list with “love, fidelity, devotion, [and] sacrifice.”

The majority opinion is a remarkable document for its frank assertion that an old institution is nonetheless subject to the shaping forces of the culture that surrounds it. In addition to the final paragraph, the opinion asserts that “the history of marriage is one of both continuity and change…even as confined to opposite-sex couples…[it] has evolved over time” (6). As women gained rights in society, it states, legal concepts like the law of coverture were abandoned in favor of more egalitarian arrangements, altering marriage irrevocably (7). Whatever its legal merits (a standard I am not equipped to evaluate), the
argument shows the malleability of seemingly bedrock concepts like the definition of marriage.

What the majority opinion for this case does not address is the fact that marriage is (still) the privilege of the wealthy, still a way to declare social normalcy. For those queer folks who resist marriage, who do not want to partner off (or want to partner off non-sexually and/or with more than one partner), for those who are poor, or simply focused on surviving, the decision does little to alter the livability of their lives. One might object that I am engaging in “what-aboutism,” where a real victory is offset by complaints that it does not address certain problems tangentially related to it. Fair enough; this is not a decision about the humanity of LGBT people, though clearly the majority Justices position themselves in the discourse of human rights. Even apart from these concerns, however, implicit in the closing paragraph are several assumptions that bear questioning: that marriage is an antidote to “loneliness”; that marriage is a somewhat mystical union of two people “into something greater than once they were”; that changing an institution is a way to “respect” it. The latter assumption, for example, seems to me downright wrong. Without disrespecting marriage—without, that is, insisting on the respect that traditional marriage denied—married women would still be unable to open bank accounts in their own name, have custody of their children in the case of divorce, or bring charges of abuse, including sexual abuse, against their husbands. Thus, disrespecting institutions is a basic principle of radical and liberatory politics. It is

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1As Colin Walsmley summed up in the *Huffington Post*: “40% of all homeless youth are LGBT,” and as the campaign to fight for marriage equality ramped up over the past few years (requiring massive resources), the number of “queer youth on the street” rose (Walmsley). Many of these youth are Black and Latino.
politically expedient for both liberal feminism and mainstream gay and lesbian rights movements to paint themselves as benign, challenging no real foundational social mores, but in fact, without challenging social mores, no change would ever happen. One of the most common complaints about the marriage equality movement from within queer and feminist communities is that, by making same-sex (and, perhaps I should add, two-person) marriage the major civil rights issue of the community, the movement has normalized itself and become less radical, less willing to challenge oppression on many fronts, and perhaps even less aware of the many ways that people can be marginalized in addition to sexuality. This (literal) domestication of queers is clearly tied in to traditional notions of family—with its conceptual shadow, children—notions that seem to go without saying, that fly under the critical radar.

Contemporaneously with the movement for marriage equality, and just as polarizing, movements for immigration reform have continued to gain momentum as large numbers of people are deported under the Obama administration. The chorus of the 2013 song “Ice El Hielo”\(^2\) by the Los Angeles-based band La Santa Cecilia demonstrates some of the complicated family dynamics at play in the politics around immigration and legality:

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\text{El Hielo anda suelto por esas calles / Nunca se sabe cuando nos va a tocar / ahora los niños lloran a la salida / Lloran al ver que no llegará mamá / Uno se queda aquí, otro se queda allá, / Eso pasa por salir a trabajar.}
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\(^2\) A division of the Department of Homeland Security, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) is a federal agency tasked with “[enforcing] federal laws governing border control, customs, trade and immigration to promote homeland security and public safety,” which means that they are the ones who raid businesses and deport people who are in the country without proper documentation in the service of stopping “illegal movement of people and trade” (www.ice.gov).
[ICE prowls the streets, / We never know when it’s our turn / Now the children cry at saying good-bye / They cry because Mom isn’t coming home / One stays on this side of the border, the other stays over there / All because of going out to work.] (“Ice El Hielo”)

The emotional crux of the song is this chorus; when Marisol Hernández’s voice soars over “Uno se queda aquí, otro se queda allá,” the feeling is palpable, capturing the devastation of families divided by deportation.³ In the music video for this song, a Latina, a young Latino, and an older Latino go through their morning routines with their families: eating breakfast, putting on their uniforms, and traveling to work (by bus, car, and bicycle, respectively). Though the older man lives in a kind of boarding house with other men, he gazes at a picture of a female family member (wife? sister?) standing in front of a cactus, clipped to a letter, upon waking up, bringing her into his morning routine in spite of her (presumed) physical distance from him. A key moment comes near the middle of the video, when the younger man zips up his uniform (a full suit of SWAT-style riot gear) and turns around to reveal “ICE” stamped on the back. The older man is a cook and the woman is a server in the restaurant that, by the end of the video, has been raided by the young man’s ICE team.

It is impossible not to understand the import of this music video, even if one does not speak any Spanish, and it is extremely moving. The music video informs viewers at the end that not only are many of the actors in the video undocumented (including the one

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³ I attended a panel at the 2nd Biennial Latino/a Literary Theory and Criticism Conference in New York City on April 23-26, 2015, where Lorena Alvarado of Northwestern University presented a talk entitled, “Anthologies of Solidarity: Music, Espousal and the Immigrant Subject.” Alvarado cited “Ice El Hielo,” and emphasized the chorus’ emotional impact, especially in relation to DREAMers; though I had already heard the song and was aware of La Santa Cecilia, her talk made me view the song in a new light as part of an ongoing discourse about immigration within Latino/a communities.
who portrayed the ICE officer), but so is one of the band members of La Santa Cecilia itself, José “Pepe” Carlos; after this information crosses the screen, the hashtag “#Not1More” flashes. The “#Not1More” campaign aims to raise awareness about and to end deportations “through organizing, art, legislation, and action” (“About”). In 2012, approximately 419,000 people were deported from the United States; of those, 220,000 were classified as “non-criminal”; this is in contrast to 188,000 deportations (116,000 non-criminal) in 2000 (González-Barrera). According to a report released by ICE, in fiscal year 2014, the four top countries of origin for deported individuals were Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (“Immigration Removals”). In light of these statistics, the video is clearly meant to be not only a pedagogical tool, but a call to action for those who may (mistakenly, the video implies) believe that this is an issue distant from their lives and the people they know. As the family of the server mourns their loss at the end of the video, the havoc wreaked on families by deportation becomes immediate and affecting. Instead of showing the anxiety, guilt, or terror of immigrating to the United States without documentation, or even the moral and emotional stress of being an ICE agent, the video and song lyrics underline the ordinariness and similarities between the undocumented people and the ICE agent through their shared routines around family. This song uses the trope of family to draw in viewers and then offer them a way to participate in efforts to relieve this problem. Like the final paragraph of the Obergefell majority opinion, however, the rhetorical strategy of “we all have families” leaves uncontested basic definitions of family. The visual argument that the video makes invokes family on at least two levels: the literal families of the three characters as well as
the plot twist that one of these three members of the “Latino family” is actively working against his fellow Latinos/as in spite of their similarities with and connections to each other. As in the closing paragraph of the Obergefell decision, family is romanticized as an unquestioned value, leaving conservative assumptions about human legitimacy and kinship intact. In fact, there is nothing to challenge the most orthodox and conventional notions of family in the plea that immigration destroys families; Jim Daly of the conservative organization and media empire Focus on the Family, for example, added his name to the 2012 “Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform,” a simple (perhaps simplistic) document calling for the federal government to protect national borders and the “rules of law” while also “[protecting] the unity of the immediate family” (“Evangelical”).

Both the Obergefell document and the video for “Ice El Hielo” leave unquestioned assumptions about family as a basic good and an inevitable or implicit structure of human society rather than a product of patriarchal capitalism. Both documents participate (however unintentionally or tangentially) in stereotyping about lesbian and gay couples on the one hand and Latino/a immigrants on the other that requires both groups to be hard-working, law-abiding, basically non-controversial assimilators. The rhetoric around marriage equality often argues that gay and lesbian people simply want normative family life, a “pursuit of happiness” that straight people take for granted and that should be everyone’s right. Similarly, the immigration reform discourse that relies on the destruction of nuclear families for its emotional impact
implies that whole families are a human right.\textsuperscript{4} Both of these discourses have an uneasy relationship with the intervention of the state, desiring it only so far as it will guarantee normalization and repudiating it when it seems to circumscribe freedom. Central to the logic underpinning both of these rhetorical stances is a basically conservative concept of the family.

As my dissertation reiterates over and over, the family is a complex and dynamic concept that requires careful and attentive reading. La Santa Cecilia and the five Justices of the Supreme Court who ruled in favor of marriage equality all understand the power of the family to organize people and galvanize emotion. Yet it is not enough to accept “family” as a self-evident fact of life. Instead, interrogating who counts as family, when, why, and what that accomplishes is an absolutely vital task.

\textsuperscript{4} In fact, one of the most prominent marriage equality organizations, the Human Rights Campaign, includes a page with information on Immigration Reform for community organizers and activists on their website, though the focus is specifically on LGBT immigrants, not on the effect of deportation on families.
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VITA

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