

2020

Articulating silence, sexuality, and survival: Women's lives under Caribbean dictatorships in literature

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**Articulating silence, sexuality, and survival: Women's lives under Caribbean dictatorships
in literature**

by

Anik Chartrand

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2020

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, for being the smartest man I know (but after this, we're even now).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Brianna Burke, because without her this thesis would not have been possible. Your constant support, words of wisdom, and hands-on advising pushed me beyond my intellectual and academic limits in order to write this thesis. Words cannot describe how grateful I am to your mentorship and friendship over the past two years: from editing my conference abstracts to helping me in times of emotional distress, I know that I will never have another advisor and friend like you. Thank you.

To my family, whose support throughout the years gave me the confidence to follow this academic path. To my brother and sister-in-law, Danys and Haley, for being my role models and who push me to become a better person, every day. And most importantly, my parents, Ken and Lynn, who constantly motivate me to be the best writer and academic I can be. Without you, I would have given up a long time ago. My only goal is to make you proud – *je pense que j'ai finalement fait des bons choix.*

This project would not have been possible without Madeleine and Tori, whose determination and strength gave me the inspiration to write about the power of women. I couldn't ask for better friends who were always there to make me laugh, tell me stories, and give me advice, whether I asked for it or not. Although I was 600 miles from Winnipeg, talking to you both made me feel at home.

And lastly, I am extremely privileged and grateful to have worked with amazing faculty and staff at ISU for the past two years. Thank you to everyone who has helped me along the way!

Anik Chartrand

ABSTRACT

Caribbean literature of the late 20th and early 21st century emphasizes the physical, emotional, and sexual violence women continue to suffer in countries destabilized by successive waves of colonization, slavery, and military occupations. Sexual violence towards women is especially present in Caribbean novels that feature patriarchal dictatorships that cultivated hypermasculine cultures in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba. In these novels, women are reduced to sexual objects by men, which takes away women's humanity and normalizes objectification, physical abuse, and rape.

In Chapter 2, I address how Yunior's narration affects the readers' understanding of Beli's character in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) to show that Beli's story is actually one of empowerment, resistance to oppression, and hope for a better future. The way Yunior skips around in time when telling Beli's story skews reader's perception of Beli, creating the image of a love-sick, ungrateful, hypersexualized girl, rather than a powerful, defiant woman who is the lone survivor of her entire family under the Rafael Trujillo regime. Narrated solely by Yunior, Beli's voice is absent in the novel, creating a biased perception that originates from Yunior's personal mistrust of Beli and Yunior's cultural perceptions women, which he carries from his childhood in the Dominican Republic. Yunior criticizes, ridicules, and objectifies Beli's body, inviting readers to mock her along with him. Beli thus becomes a caricature in the novel, never taken seriously as an empowered woman who resists oppression out of hope. I show that Beli's body and character is vital to understand both the potential harm of, and resistance to, Trujillato.

Chapter 3 discusses the silence surrounding sexual violence in Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness* (1995) by analyzing the novel's creation of parallel narratives. In the novel the

oppression of women runs parallel to – and is sometimes masked – by narratives of endangered frogs, and the male characters label women as having frog-like physical features. The comparison creates an allegory of women’s oppression in Haiti by illuminating women’s social status during this time. The narrator of the novel acts both as a voice for the women and as a perpetrator of the gendered, normalized violence that he grows up in, blurring boundaries and illustrating the complexity of political oppression.

A direct link between state violence embodied by a dictator and the oppression of women is illuminated in Chapter 4 in which I contrast the perception of women as sexual objects in Cristina García’s *King of Cuba* (2013) and *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992). The national narratives are juxtaposed as *King of Cuba* describes Cuban American culture during Fidel Castro’s last years from the perspectives of men while *Dreaming in Cuban* tells it from the viewpoint of women throughout Castro’s first years of the revolution and into the early 21st century. Reading these novels together, the texts complement one another to form an overview of Cuban life under Castro through the eyes of those who found success during Castro’s reign and those that suffered the consequences of his tyranny.

Together, this thesis argues that the discussion of women’s political oppression in the Caribbean is a deeply complex topic that requires multiple narrators with non-linear, intergenerational frames to articulate the trauma of, and resistance against, patriarchal dictatorships. Although objectified and violated, in these novels women are able to show power against terrorizing regimes, but their resistance is also often problematic. By taking away their humanity, women are resigned to use their sexuality and sexual expressions to gain autonomy in terrorizing regimes that see them as objects to be violated. As a group, the novels analyzed in

this thesis show writers illuminating human-rights violations and the work required to create equality in countries destabilized by waves of political violence.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

During the fourth semester of my MA, I repeatedly heard an ad on a radio show that said something along the lines of: “Tired of the Iowa winters? Then enter to win a vacation to paradise in the Dominican Republic!” Although I *was* tired of Iowa winters, I could not stop thinking if the winners of this dream vacation would know about the history of the Dominican Republic; if they would know that Hispaniola was one of first colonized islands of the New World, if they would know about the Spanish and the French’s control of the native people for more than 200 years, about the fight for independence from the Spanish, the fight for independence from Haiti, the continuation of slavery after the abolishment in 1793, the eight-year U.S. occupation in the early 20th-century, the dictator that terrorized the nation for thirty years, the massacres of Haitian people; the prison camps for people who rebelled against Dominican government, and the earthquakes that demolished infrastructure. I wondered if they would know that the imagined Dominican Republic “paradise” is a fantasy designed to distract tourists from looking beyond their picturesque vacations to see that the white sandy beaches they escape to hold the history of a colonized, ruled, politically oppressed, and frequently massacred people.

I knew that these radio winners would probably not know about the history of the Dominican Republic because I and the rest of my classmates in my second semester MA Latin American History course did not know either. The history course opened my eyes to the history of a region that is not taught in schools – a region historically tied to and ruled by U.S. politics and military occupations. The Dominican Republic is not the only Latin American nation invaded and occupied by the U.S.; Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Grenada, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama were all under U.S. occupation in the 20th-century alone, yet these

politically driven invasions are not a well-known topic of conversation in American schools. Rather, this history is censored to create an image of tropical paradise islands and nations set aside for American use and leisure.

Supriya Nair echoes the concern of the lack of historical knowledge of the Caribbean and the idealistic images created for American readers in *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours*. She argues that Caribbean literature actively resists the gratification that readers expect because it does not articulate the tourist perception of paradise, but uncovers the history beyond the vacation image (2). As a result, reading Caribbean literature is not meant always meant to be “enjoyable,” but instead creates an avenue to understand that the paradise of the Caribbean is never disconnected from the history of slavery, servitude, violence and exile (Nair 49). Nair’s perception of Caribbean Literature helps explain its lack of popularity among readers and the lack of academic scholarship on many of these novels: the Caribbean is viewed as an escape and distraction for Americans, not as a place to wrestle with the ever-lasting effects of colonization and slavery. This thesis aims to illuminate the context behind the articulation of history in Caribbean literature, specifically, the historical perception and behavior towards Caribbean women.

A critique of the “paradise” fantasy of the Caribbean is not emptied of gender: Nair argues that the Caribbean “was gendered female in the early modern emblems of the undressed sultry Americas lounging in wait for the masculine European voyager to discover and taste her charms” (2). The consumption of the Caribbean landscape by tourists is amplified by gendering the Caribbean as female: to use the gendered female nations for the pleasure and consumption of masculine needs devalues the Caribbean landscape and people, and forms the foundation of the neocolonial perception of the Caribbean as a place to invade, occupy, and control.

The invasion, occupancy, and violence against Caribbean nations and peoples transcends the gendered landscape and falls most heavily on women of Caribbean nations. The consumption of and violence against Caribbean women is a prominent narrative within the late 20th and early 21st- century literature due to the shift from U.S. occupation policy to the patriarchal dictatorships that rose in retaliation to imperial invasions. Patriarchal dictatorships such as Rafael Trujillo's thirty-year rule in the Dominican Republic, François Duvalier's fourteen-year control of Haiti, and Fidel Castro's forty-nine-year rule of Cuba began after – and in direct response to – U.S. control. These patriarchal dictatorships controlled their nations with terror, violence, and oppressive tactics that directly impacted the perception of and behavior towards women: Trujillo encouraged hypermasculinity and the control and ownership of women; Duvalier created state-sanctioned violence against women with the use of the *tontons macoutes* and labelled women as enemies of the state; and Castro normalized the objectification of women by positioning them as a commodity and currency for powerful male allies and tourists to use.¹ The brutalities against Caribbean women under dictatorships challenges any expectations of a Caribbean paradise, but this does not mean that these Caribbean nations are not flourishing, vacation paradises to enjoy, but that enjoyment should not camouflage the oppressive regimes that ruled these countries for years.

This thesis cannot encapsulate all of Caribbean history; rather, its purpose is to give a glimpse into Dominican, Haitian, and Cuban history articulated through literature to demonstrate the oppression of and violence against women that has been silenced, censored, and ignored both in literary studies and in modern politics. I discuss *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

¹ See Lauren Derby's *The Dictator's Seduction* on Trujillo; see Elizabeth Abbot's *Haiti: a Shattered Nation* and Bernard Diedrich's *The Price of Blood: History of Repression and Rebellion in Haiti under Dr. François Duvalier, 1957-1961* on Duvalier; see Michelle Chase's *Revolution within the Revolution* and *The Cuba Wars: Fidel Castro, The United States, and the Next Revolution* on Castro

(2007) by Junot Díaz, *In the Palm of Darkness* (1995) by Mayra Montero, and Cristina García's *The King of Cuba* (2013) and *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) to discuss a variety of oppressive regimes from Caribbean-American authors that seek to communicate the importance of minoritized narratives. The authors' nationality and heritage are not their sole connection to one another: each text discusses a Caribbean country that has been occupied by the U.S. in the 20th-century, uses dictatorships as a political backdrop, incorporates multilingual, polyphonic narrators, and with exception of *Dreaming in Cuban*, uses male narratives to portray female oppression during these regimes. The portrayal of women through the perception of male characters demonstrates the continued patriarchal narrative in these countries and the need for the authors to use male figures in order to gain a perspective of female narratives during this time period. Díaz, Montero, and García do not simply write the history of women's oppression; rather, their writing engages directly with the *continued* oppression these women face, in part, by writing through male perspectives.

The oppression of women under patriarchal dictatorships in these texts is violent and enacted directly upon the bodies of women. Women's bodies are not their own in these texts; rather, their bodies belong to men to objectify and sexually violate because of the hypermasculine culture created by the dictators and within their regimes. Women are expected to be willing sexual subjects for men, but simultaneously project an image of purity and virginity. The oppression of women's sexuality by men has dominated Caribbean politics since colonization, as Donette Francis argues. She writes that the "sexual lives of Caribbean people have been matters of imperial and national state interests and central to colonial and postcolonial articulations of citizenship" since colonization (*Fictions 2*). The intersection of Caribbean

women's sexuality studies and patriarchal dictatorships illuminates how sexual violence against women became a state-sanctioned standard due to the hypermasculine national politics.

Throughout this thesis, I rely on theories of gender and sexuality from literature scholars, psychologists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists utilizing multiple aspects of gender and sexuality studies. In order to analyze and articulate the trauma women suffer in these novels, using only historical context and literary theory is not enough. Multiple layers of textual analysis embedded within cultural theory, psychology, and history are needed to make sense of not only the situation these women face, but how they were able to regain forms of autonomy during regimes that aimed to destroy their identities and bodies.

Although each text is written within a specific historical context, such knowledge is not always clear and understood by the reader. Therefore, throughout the thesis I create a basic understanding of Dominican, Haitian, and Cuban history under their respective dictators to clarify the importance of certain allusions, characters, locations, and scenes in each text. I derive historical context from historians and authors who have a national heritage or connection to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, or Cuba to create a Caribbean-focused understanding, rather than a European or American-focused perception of the texts. Of course, I am not a historian, and provide selective and specific information to guide my analysis; each reader must delve deeper for a more complete understanding of the complex histories of these countries. Taking a note from Carolyn Merchant who argues that "to write history from a feminist perspective is to turn it upside down – to see social structure from the bottom up and to flip-flop mainstream values," the main historical sources used in this thesis are from feminists' perspectives because I wanted the historical context to focus on the women affected by these regimes rather than highlighting the dictators themselves (Merchant xx).

In analyzing how each text discusses the oppression of women in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba, the direct or in-direct discussion of dictators and oppressive regimes engages readers to change their perceptions of Caribbean nations and political oppression. Neither Díaz, Montero, nor García explain the political history or oppression clearly; rather, they choose to engage in the silenced and censored forms of history by only showing glimpses of the true horror people and their nations endured. Additionally, only *King of Cuba* directly imagines the point of view of a character based on a dictator: El Comandante is the representation for Fidel Castro, but García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, as well as Díaz and Montero's novels, do not directly personify dictators. In Díaz's novel, Trujillo is a background character, mainly discussed in footnotes and through offhand remarks by primary characters, while Montero's novel barely mentions the Duvalier regime in any way, only mentioning the *tontons macoutes* in passing. These three authors require the reader to go beyond their scope of knowledge on the Caribbean and take the time to research for themselves the political history and culture of these nations.

To start, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* uses footnotes to communicate Dominican history, from its colonization to Dominican culture under Trujillo. The language Díaz uses to paint the picture of the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's regime is steeped in fantasy-novel jargon, local Spanish phrases that Google Translate cannot decipher properly, and allusions to historical events not clearly explained. The complicated language and writing style of Díaz and his main narrator, Yunior, affects the readers' understanding of the characters – specifically, Beli. In Chapter 2 I argue that the way Yunior frames Beli's story skews readers' perception of Beli, creating the image of a love-sick, ungrateful, hypersexualized girl, rather than a powerful, defiant woman who is the lone survivor of her entire family during the Trujillo regime, escapes to the U.S., and raises her children as a single mother. The

mischaracterization of Beli is furthered by the absence of her own voice in the novel, which creates a biased perception of her that originates from Yuniór's personal mistrust of Beli and Yuniór's cultural perceptions of women, which he carries from his childhood in the Dominican Republic. Yuniór criticizes, ridicules, and objectifies Beli's body, inviting readers to mock her along with him.

Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness* requires an extensive knowledge of Haitian history, politics, and culture in order to understand the context behind the endangered frog narrative. Haiti under François and Jean-Claude Duvalier was especially traumatic because of the unprecedented level of state-sanctioned violence against women, yet that violent history has been heavily censored. In order to properly articulate the violence against women during this time, Chapter 3 analyzes how Montero creates parallel narratives of the oppression of women with the endangering of frogs. Women in the novel, specifically the unnamed German tourist and Ganesha, are written in comparison to the endangered blood frog to demonstrate female oppression and the termination of their sexual freedom during the Duvalierist state. The unnamed German tourist's physical description and behavior are irrevocably similar to the blood frog, while Ganesha's relationship to her boyfriend, Jasper Wilbur, or "Papa Crapaud," is an allegory of capture. Montero uses an allegorical frame in order to show women's social standing and how the dehumanization of women normalized state-sanctioned violence. The narrator, Thierry, acts as a voice for the women *and* as a perpetrator of the gendered violence that he grows up in, blurring boundaries and illustrating the complexity of political oppression of Haiti.

The marginalization, sexualization, and silence of Cuban women to further advance the interest of a patriarchal society run by dictator Fidel Castro form the critical backdrop to García's *King of Cuba* and *Dreaming in Cuban*. Chapter 4 argues that the national narratives are

juxtaposed as *King of Cuba* describes Cuban and Cuban American culture during Castro's last years from the perspectives of men while *Dreaming in Cuban* tells it from the viewpoint of women throughout Castro's first years of the revolution and into the early 21st century. By reading these novels together, the texts complement one another to form an overview of Cuban life during the 20th century through the eyes of those who found success during Castro's reign and those that suffered the consequences of his tyranny. The women in *Dreaming in Cuban* require different time frames and intergenerational overlapping narratives to communicate the complexity of normalized and internalized women's oppression and sexual violence, while the men in *King of Cuba* need only two irrevocably similar voices to show the privilege of a patriarchal society. The marginalization of women is not only reflected within the stories of the characters, but also by how the stories are *told*.

All of these novels speak to questions of power, violence, and oppression in relation to patriarchal dictatorships, but they also reveal levels of resistance and control for those marginalized. At first glance, the women in Díaz, Montero, and García's novels might appear to be complacent in their sexual oppression: staying in relationships with abusive men, seeking out sex, following orders, and in some instances, enacting violence against other women and men – but these women characters are much more than that. The women in these novels are strong, powerful, and *defiant*. They express their sexuality in regimes that view women as sexual objects and enemies of the state. They are dehumanized as objects, but regain forms of power and control by taking back their bodies and through telling their stories. For example, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Beli's body is ridiculed by Yunió, but her body wears the scars of a black woman born in the Dominican Republic whose family was murdered by Trujillato, who was sold into slavery, beaten and raped by Trujillo guards, and at the end is cancer ridden *but*

still she survives. Her body is the epicenter of mockery, but is also the symbol for defiance against the regime that sought her death. The censored and silenced history of Haiti is communicated throughout *In the Palm of Darkness*, illustrating resistance by voicing historically silent narratives. The women are the “forgotten” characters in Thierry and Victor’s stories, but the violence against them penetrates the male narratives to establish primary focus in the novel. The women are beaten, raped, and captured, but their stories cannot be silenced and ignored. The women in *King of Cuba* and *Dreaming in Cuban* regain autonomy of their bodies by establishing control over men who objectify and sexualize them: Vilma uses sex with Goyo to provide financial wealth for herself and her son; Celia fantasizes about a Spanish lover to defy against her abusive husband; Lourdes uses sex in order to cope with the rape she survived at the hands of Cuban soldiers; and Felicia demonstrates power over her husbands who sexually abuse her.

Díaz, Montero, and García do not write solely about the violence against women, but also illustrate how resistance and defiance rises in times of terror. The novels involve horrible acts against women, but also show the strength of the Caribbean community, the love and support these women gain from their families and friends, and the ability to survive against all odds. These writers insist their stories be told, that we hear their voices. Readers must decipher polyphonic narrators, vague allusions, and dominating male perspectives in order to sympathize, appreciate, and *enjoy* the strength that Caribbean literary women possess.

CHAPTER 2. HARM, HOPE, AND RESISTANCE IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S

THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

Here she is: Hypatía Belicia Cabral, the Third and Final Daughter. Suspicious, angry, scowling, uncommunicative, a wounded hungry campesina, but with an expression and posture that shouted in bold, gothic letters: DEFIANT.

--Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, focuses primarily on Beli's son, Oscar de León, an overweight Dominican-American with low self-esteem who struggles to talk to women without discussing sci-fi films. To understand Oscar's character, Yunior recounts histories of Oscar, his sister, grandfather, and mother's life. Every character's story shapes the readers' understanding of Oscar and his eventual death. In particular, Yunior focuses on Beli as the primary reason why Oscar is fated to die so young. Because of the way Yunior – and in turn, Díaz – portrays Beli, she becomes the scapegoat for the de León family, the reason why their history is tragic, and a target to ridicule and critique. Yunior's role as the narrator of *Oscar Wao* positions his account of events as the only and official history of Oscar and Beli, leading the reader to also believe that Beli is to blame for the situation of her family.

Minimal critical attention has been given to Beli in published scholarship on this novel, most of which describes her as hardly a character at all. Primarily analyzed to discuss racial and gender hierarchies in the Dominican Republic during the reign of dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, Beli's story is lost within the primary narratives of her children. Scholarship on Beli's narrative mislabels her as Yunior does: she is portrayed as an overtly sexual, rebellious, careless woman who becomes a horrific mother to her children. Glenda R. Carpio labels Beli's narrative as a simple coming of age story (275), while Octavio Borges-Delgado sees Beli as

“indistinguishable [from] the story of many other migrant narratives” (225). The consistent misunderstanding of Beli’s character, from Yunior and scholars, creates a shadow that eclipses Beli’s narrative, when her story, properly contextualized, is actually one of power, resistance, and hope.

To remove this shadow, I address how Yunior’s narration affects the readers’ understanding of Beli’s character. The way Yunior skips around in time when telling Beli’s story skews readers’ perception of Beli, creating the image of a love-sick, ungrateful, hypersexualized girl, rather than a powerful, defiant woman who is the lone survivor of her entire family during the Trujillo regime, and who escaped the Dominican Republic to become a single mother and build a better life for her children. Narrated solely by Yunior, Beli’s voice is absent in the novel, creating a biased perception that originates from Yunior’s personal mistrust of Beli and Yunior’s cultural perceptions of women, which he carries from his childhood in the Dominican Republic. Yunior criticizes, ridicules, and objectifies Beli’s body, inviting readers to mock her along with him. Beli thus becomes a caricature in the novel, never taken seriously as a woman of resistance and power, and as a symbol of hope. In other words, Yunior’s framework for the novel makes it difficult to see Beli’s strength and the reality that she is a survivor of a terrorizing dictatorship. In the following pages, I show that Beli’s body and character, although mocked and criticized by most characters, is vital to understanding both the potential harm of, and resistance to, Trujillato. Rather than *fukú*, Beli’s body gives her power and the faintest glimmer of hope. Confronting the mischaracterization of Beli’s character with the awareness of her sexual power disrupts the perception of Beli’s narrative.

Oscar Wao is Yunior’s attempt to write a biography of Oscar as well as Oscar’s family history in the United States and the Dominican Republic, starting with his grandfather, Abelard.

The non-chronological story is multigenerational, transnational, and multilingual, encompassing stories of all de León family members, as well as Yuniór. The first time the reader meets Oscar's mother is told from the perspective of her children and Yuniór, creating an image of a menacing, uncaring mother. However, the complete story of Beli comes together in her chapter much later in the novel, told through the narration of Yuniór, who pieces together her narrative through stories he hears from Lola (who, in turn, hears stories from Beli as she is dying of cancer), Oscar's writing, and his own knowledge of the history of the Dominican Republic. Piercing through this hodgepodge of Beli's story is also Yuniór's commentary, depicting Beli as a pornographic sci-fi fantasy – particular to Yuniór and highly fetishized – as he continually describes her exaggeratedly large breasts. Behind Yuniór's misleading construction of Beli is the horrific reality of her life in the Dominican Republic. As a child, Beli's family suffers violence and intergenerational trauma at the hands of the Trujillo regime: Beli's mother is murdered, then her sisters, followed by her father's imprisonment, torture, and eventual death. Orphaned, Beli becomes the sole survivor of the family, sold into child slavery where she experiences violence until her aunt, La Inca, finds her and becomes her guardian. Despite all the trauma, Beli grows up to be a beautiful woman, which tragically attracts élite men such as the Gangster. During Beli's relationship with the Gangster, the Gangster's wife, sister to Trujillo, discovers the affair and orders a violent and sexual attack on Beli that almost kills her. After the attack, La Inca forces Beli to leave the country and sends her to the United States where she meets her future unnamed husband and raises her two children. Yet, the novel does not begin with the personal trauma and suffering that influences Beli's actions as a mother; rather, it begins with the perception of Beli through the eyes of her children and Yuniór.

The frame of the novel situates Yunió, Oscar, and Lola's perception of Beli and her body first before explaining Beli's traumatic childhood, therefore manipulating the reader's perspective of Beli. Our impression as readers is first of Beli as a violent, cold woman, which prevents readers from granting sympathy to Beli as an adult carrying trauma. Her behavior toward her children is thus uncontextualized without origin or explanation. There is very little scholarship focused solely on Beli, but when it is focused on her, it analyzes the framework of the novel, generating an unfavorable caricature of Beli that implies she is unworthy of both reader or scholarly attention. Only later chapters in the novel shine a light on Beli's struggles in the Dominican Republic, yet even so, Yunió begins her narrative with her failures as a love-sick teenager, rather than beginning with her story as an orphaned child slave. Yunió consistently disempowers Beli by how he frames her narrative, ultimately exiling her from readers and critics. Jennifer Harford Vargas argues that Yunió's storytelling makes him a "narrative dictator...because he controls and orders representation and because he collects, writes down, and reshapes a plethora of oral stories that have been recounted to him" ("Dictating a Zafa" 202). Beli's life is in Yunió's hands, which allows him to interpret and label her narrative in ways that suit his own desires.

Beli is first introduced as she yells at Oscar for crying over a girl, while hauling him by the ear and then pushing him to the floor she yells, "Dale un galletazo...then see if the little puta respects you"² (14). The first glimpse of Beli's character, as she perpetuates physical violence on her youngest child and tells her children to use violence on others, such as giving a girl a slap to grab her attention, generates the image of an abusive mother without the ability to sympathize or to be caring; the reader does not know the trauma that fuels violence and fear in Beli. Yunió

² *Dale un galletzo* roughly translates to "give her a slap"

does not mention the physical suffering she endured as a child or teenager, nor does he give reason as to why Beli resorts to violence with her children. While there is no excuse for beating a child, and I do not mean to imply otherwise, Beli's history contextualizes her behavior in this moment. Yet Beli's history and the history of the Dominican Republic is unknown to Yuniór's audience at this time, creating a void of knowledge of Beli's life that leads her to act towards her children in this manner. Without context, Beli looks like a violent monster of her own making in this moment, and this violent image of Beli continues to haunt the reader.

Although Beli is first portrayed as she beats and abuses her children, it is Yuniór's descriptions of her body that overwhelm all of her characteristics as the novel progresses. In fact, Yuniór consistently dismisses Beli's life and experiences by focusing on her body. For example, moments before Beli's attack on Oscar above, Yuniór states, "she was getting ready to go to her second job, the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set" (14). Deciding to comment unfavorably on her hands, immediately following the description of her as a hard-working mother, Yuniór diminishes the labor it takes for an immigrant to create a life and raise a family in America; he instead shows the reader a woman with disfigured hands. Although Yuniór does note her multiple jobs, giving the reader a glimpse into the sacrifices she makes for her children, he does not take the time to describe her employment as he does with her hands. Instead, Yuniór takes a positive characteristic and disappears it in a negative image of her body. Furthermore, this comment exemplifies how much of Beli's narrative is portrayed through corporeal descriptions: her character becomes written on and is visible solely through her body.

The eclipsing of female voices, both by Yuniór and the novel as a whole, continues into Lola's chapter, where Yuniór inserts himself into her narrative to further his own portrayal of Beli. The chapter begins with Lola's first-person account, but switches to a second-person

narration written in italics when describing the moment that Lola learns of her mother's breast cancer. The italicized narration states: "This is how it all starts: with *your* mother calling you into the bathroom" (51, *emphasis added*). The use of second-person in these passages in Lola's seemingly singular narration includes Yuniór's fantasy of what *he* believes Lola felt when she discovers her mother's cancer. Yuniór's commentary in Lola's story could be anywhere, since he comments consistently throughout the novel, yet his narration appears during Lola's *mother's* experience and in particular, on the topic of her breasts:

Your mother's breasts are *immensities*. One of the wonders of the world. The only ones you've seen that are bigger are in nudie magazines or on really fat ladies. They're 36 triple-Ds and the aureoles are as big as saucers and black as pitch and their edges are fierce hairs that sometimes she plucked and sometimes she didn't. These breasts have always embarrassed you and when you walk in public with her you are always conscious of them. After her face and her hair, her chest is what she is most proud of. (51-52, *emphasis Díaz*)

Yuniór cannot truly know what Beli's breasts look like; the novel never hints at intimacy between the two of them. Instead, this description is purely fetish, a hyper-sexualized fantasy of Beli. Yuniór's excessive description of Lola's mother's breasts characterizes Beli solely for her sexual attributes by mentioning the size of her breasts in four different ways: "immensities," "a wonder of the world," similar to "nudie magazines or on really fat ladies," and by their physical size, "36 triple-Ds." This attention creates the image that Beli's breasts are central to her character. Yuniór's description of Beli's breasts belittles her because he reduces her body to a grotesque pornographic image that Yuniór only sees in "nudie magazines," where "36 triple-Ds" are the fantasy. Yet, mixed with the pornographic "immensities," Yuniór describes the hair on

her breasts “that sometimes she plucked and sometimes she didn’t,” and as the source of embarrassment for Lola. Rather than celebrate Beli’s breasts, celebrate the femininity and motherhood which her breasts can represent, or ignore them all together as a private matter, Yuniór writes that Lola is embarrassed to have Beli as a mother solely because of Beli’s breasts and body. His descriptions violate Beli and exposes her to the reader as an embarrassing monstrosity, yet the reader is made complicit in Beli’s humiliation, whether they insist on it or not, before any true knowledge of Beli and her life in the Dominican Republic is told. Yuniór not only possesses knowledge of the details of Beli’s breasts but *exposes* them to his readers: the large, dark shape of her aureoles and the fierce hairs which “sometimes she plucked and sometimes she didn’t” (52). In doing so, Yuniór controls Beli’s body and determines perceptions of her body and character. The extremely intimate knowledge of Beli’s breasts and the complete exposure of those details, without indication of intimacy between the two, is a declaration of the complete control Yuniór has of Beli’s narration: he is the sole narrator and *possessor* of her and her body. In doing so, Yuniór shifts the focus away from Beli’s tragic illness and turns it into a grotesque pornographic fantasy.

Discovering that her mother has cancer is a pivotal moment in Lola’s life; she is described as being “overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change,” but this tragedy is mitigated by Yuniór’s comments that finding the lump in Beli’s breast is “exhilarating,” that to Lola it feels like “bright lights zoom through [her] like photon torpedoes, like comets” (53). Yuniór imagines that Lola is exhilarated by her mother’s cancer; she erupts with “bright lights” at the thought that her mother’s immense breasts are diseased, no longer a source of pride, but now a source of illness. Yuniór states that doctors remove the breast and Beli begins chemotherapy, and “it’s in that bathroom where it all begins.

Where [Lola] begins” (53). He imagines that Lola’s life begins with the illness of her mother, with the removal of the breast, and with the removal of the shame she feels towards mother (53). Yuniór’s control of Beli’s narration extends to Lola, adding to the possession of her character and body through Lola’s narrative. Not only does Yuniór interrupt the female narrative once more, but illustrates entitlement to interrupting Lola’s narrative to tell his own perspective of Lola and Beli’s history, an entitlement that matches the one he exhibits when he exposes Beli’s breasts. Beli’s breasts become central to her character and even indicative of who she is, a testament of her children’s shame, the cause of her ultimate death, and the subject of Yuniór’s fantasy.

The focus on Beli’s body extends past Lola’s narrative and into the chapter that is solely about Beli. During the summer when Beli becomes a woman, she takes control over her own body, understanding that womanly attributes might be her chance to escape, to defy Trujillato:

Beli, who’d been waiting for something exactly like her body her whole life, was sent *over the moon* by what she now knew. By the undeniable concreteness of her desirability which was, in its own way, Power...Hypatía Belicia Cabral finally had power and a true sense of self (94, *emphasis Díaz*).

The “Power” that Beli feels she possesses is the power that élite Dominican men had during the time: the power to seduce and use her sexuality to gain status over others. Lauren Derby argues that élite Dominican men, following the practices of Trujillo himself, were “daring, insolent,” were able to indulge “in erotic escapades,” to gain status in Trujillo’s inner-circle (175); however, Beli uses these tactics for her own to gain and to take power *away* from the upper-class men. Although the power that her body possesses is the only power she may have because she is a lower-class black orphan from a disgraced family, sexual power was the primary tool used by

élite men to gain status during Trujillato, according to Derby (111). Beli indulges in her own erotic escapades with Jack Pujols and the Gangster for her own advantage: she uses sex and relationships with these men in the hope of climbing the ranks of privilege and to escape her class and status. Unlike Yuniór's characterization of Beli as a lovesick, naïve child, in actuality, Beli takes advantage of her body and her sexuality to use men for her own gain, yet Yuniór's negative perception of Beli continues to be the forefront of the novel.

It is unclear when Yuniór's mistreatment of Beli's body and her character starts: Yuniór only meets Beli when Oscar becomes his roommate in college, yet Yuniór takes the opportunity to narrate her entire childhood in Dominican Republic in poor light. Yuniór's dislike for Beli might stem from his anger at Beli for treating Oscar and Lola with what he perceives as cruelty, violence, and insults on their appearance and character, yet these give no indication as to why Yuniór hypersexualizes Beli's body. Yuniór's pornographic comments are a product of his personal history as well as of the Trujillo regime, which occupied Dominican culture even after Trujillo's assassination in 1961. A deeper understanding of how Trujillo shaped the Dominican Republic's history, culture and politics is important to contextualize how Díaz writes Yuniór, because Yuniór is a product of the Trujillato culture that was ruled by a sexually predatory dictator.

The Dominican Republic under Trujillo experienced massive change, especially in regard to gender norms. Hypermasculinity was encouraged, "one that challenged the more controlled, respectable self-presentation of the élite," to embrace Trujillo's nationalist project (Derby 133). Performance of hypermasculinity involved the control and ownership of women, particularly the public voyeurism of women. Derby argues that the 1955 Free World's Fair of Peace and Confraternity, a yearlong festival commemorating Trujillo's twenty-fifth year in power, is

exemplary of public voyeurism because of the way women were presented to the public to “judge,” which Derby remarks is similar to the presenting of Dominican cattle, an economic stable in the Dominican economy (115). Derby notes that “control over women, like that over cattle, represented a ‘currency of power’ expressive of dominion,” which positioned women as possessions to be gazed upon, assessed, and possessed (115). Although Yuniór was not in the Dominican Republic during the Free World’s Fair or during Trujillo’s reign, the voyeuristic hypermasculine ideology continued to dominate Dominican culture for a long time after Trujillo’s assassination. Yuniór mirrors Dominican cultural norms which he then transfers into American life, indicative of the cultural hybridity that can characterize second-generation migrants. Peggy Levitt, in *The Transnational Villagers*, describes migrants carrying social values to their new homelands, noting that “migrants send or bring back the values and practices they have been exposed to and add these social remittances to the repertoire, both expanding and transforming” them (55). Yuniór’s hypermasculine characteristics from the Dominican Republic becomes visible through his description of women. In the chapter where Yuniór reveals himself as the narrator, he remarks how, “believe it or not, [he] cared about Lola. She was a girl it was easy to care about” (168). His care for Lola quickly diminishes because he immediately follows his comment of care for Lola with descriptions of her body: “Lola like the fucking opposite girls I usually macked on: bitch was almost six feet tall with no tetas at all and darker than your darkest grandma” (168). Yuniór’s emotional connection to Lola is undermined by his treatment of Lola as a sexual object rather than someone he cares about, and the notion that he “macks” on a lot of other women. Yuniór’s inability to show compassion towards a woman and the comments he makes on Lola’s body creates a hypermasculine Dominican male image: a judge and possessor of female bodies.

The hypermasculine culture of the Dominican man under Trujillo is continuously demonstrated in Yuniór's need to comment on Beli's appearance, yet it does not necessarily indicate the malice that Yuniór feels towards the mother. I argue that the hateful comments towards her character stem from Beli's resistance to the Trujillo regime because she represents antithetical values of family and the nation, which Yuniór perceives as deviant. These "deviant" values align closely to the "modern woman" values that swept through the Dominican Republic during the 1950s, which, according to Derby, "became the focus of loathing and resentment when they ventured onto terrain that was no longer their own," characterized by men who view women as "embodying the uncontained, dangerously capricious spiritual power of the feminine" (112). In Yuniór's narrative, Beli is "uncontained," "dangerous," the center for his loathing and resentment because of Yuniór's hypermasculine perception of women, like Lola, as sexual objects. Yuniór emulates Trujillato culture, which is "based on the consumption of women (and their status) through sexual conquests," as well as being "respeto" which Derby argues is "a term which conjoins masculinity, authority, and legitimacy" (111). In this case Yuniór's sexual conquest is not through physical actions, but through his narration: he conquers Beli's body and sexuality through his possession of her narrative. Through his sexual conquest he gains masculinity, authority, and legitimacy as a narrator and Dominican man. This does not excuse Yuniór's actions towards Beli and other women in the novel, only illuminates the origins of his degrading comments.

The authoritative comments towards Beli's body further distracts reader from the resistance of Beli's early life, instead portraying her as a naïve teenager with pornographic breasts. However, the smallest details suggest she is actually fighting against the regime and its ideals in the ways she can, and in ways that escalate as she grows into adulthood.

Resisting against the regime causes harm for Beli: she survives the assassination of her family only to be sold into child slavery, enters in a relationship with Jack Pujols, the son of a rich Dominican politician, but is expelled when she gets caught in the school janitorial closet with him, and finds love with the Gangster, a member of Trujillo's inner circle, where she hopes he will help her escape the Dominican Republic, but is almost killed by his wife's body guards. Yet hope can be found in such harm. Lauren Halperin addresses harm and deviance on Latina bodies and minds, and positions individual harm that befalls on Latina subjects "alongside collective forms of harm, including structural oppression, subjugation, and dispossession" (2). Harm, Halperin discusses, consists of:

psychological, physical and geopolitical damage experience by, and imposed on and within, individuals and communities. While similar to pain, it encompasses more than pain, moving beyond the individual psychological and/or physical suffering to which pain refers. (3)

Beli suffers this definition of harm under Trujillo, because of her black skin and child-slavery scars, yet both can also be seen as a resistance to the regime and, Halperin argues, in resistance and harm there can be hope. Halperin argues that "hope exists in the attempts at resistance, however futile these attempts may be or seem. It exists in the sharing of often painful individual and collective *historias* and in the remembrance of harm in order to move past it and seek to rectify it" (4). Halperin's theories of harm and hope illustrates the ways Beli's harm, and the ways she defends her black skin and scars as signs of resistance and therefore hope. If the reader is capable of reading *through* Yuniol's narrative bias, it becomes clear the details of Beli's narrative are about hope and defiance when living in a nation under the control of a violent dictator.

In fact, Beli's very survival as a child defies the regime because she is born with "*black black*" skin – or in other words, the taboo status of a mixed Dominican-Haitian person, which Yunion notes is "that special blend the Dominican government swears *no existe*" (131, 26, *emphasis Díaz*). She does not exist in the eyes of the Dominican Republic, or at least *should* not exist.³ During the Trujillo regime, persons with no hint of whiteness "became the locus of fear and revulsion representing the antithesis of the civilized colonial order" (Derby 190). Trujillo's regime depended on the appearances and performances of civilized, white elitist government and civilians, making Beli a complete contradiction to the nationalist image.

Beli's rebellious path starts from birth, exuding from her very skin-tone, yet she has no other choice but be so. Her skin might be a symbol of potential destruction, exile, and death, yet she does not hide it – instead, she flaunts her skin with low cut shirts and short shorts, parading her "kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack" skin, a direct mockery of Trujillo's empire and the Haitian conquest and massacre that occurred under his rule (131).⁴ Brygida Gasztold argues that skin color in *Oscar Wao* "does not help the characters to define themselves as much as it differentiates them from the privileged others, which results in the feelings of discrimination and ostracism" (215). Yunion's lengthy description of Beli's skin tone does not define Beli but *differentiates* her from others and from Yunion himself. He distances himself from Beli, a woman from his own country and culture, because he uses her skin tone to extract himself from her character, which ultimately gives him the ability to portray her as he

³ According to a study by the American Library of Congress, Dominican Republic, a Spanish colony, had 60,000 African slaves by the end of the eighteenth century, while Haiti, a French colony, had at least 500,000 (Silver). After each colony gained independence, strong national identities were established, creating a geographical and cultural border between the two countries. Due to the African heritage of slaves in the eighteenth century, Haitians are typically darker-skinned than their lighter-skinned neighbors, creating institutionalized racism that was set by the early colonizers.

⁴ Ordered by Trujillo, the 1937 Parsley Massacre saw Dominican soldiers killing as many as 20,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic (Langley 64).

does. In addition, Yunior differentiates himself from Beli by the names he gives her black skin, which “ties Beli’s blackness to numerous geographical regions – the Congo, Latin America, India, and Mexico,” Emily A Shifflette argues, “thus, Beli’s connections to regions across the globe suggests she functions as an allegorical slave figure” (12). Yunior not only possesses Beli’s body through his narration of her sexualized features, but also through his description of her black skin. Beli is, to some extent, his slave to control and possess for his own needs. Because of the very history she is born into, Beli’s black skin causes an intersection of Trujillo’s harm and the resistance against the violence. Her body – in both skin color and sexualization – becomes an image of the nation’s demise, with her power to defy Trujillo’s control, and her ability to create hope out of harm.

Beli’s scars from her time as a *criada*, a household maid treated like a slave, highlight the corporeal characteristics that exemplify the intersection of harm and resistance, signifying her survival and rise from slavery. During her time as a *criada*, Beli is burned by her owners because she skips her work to attend school. Described as “immensely stubborn,” Beli suffers horrible burns caused by her “owners” splashing “a pan of hot oil on her back. The burn nearly killing her” (255). The scars on her black body serve as the constant reminder of her time as a child-slave, signifying the suffering she went through, living as one of “the most demolished, overworked human beings” in the Dominican Republic (255). Yet, the scars also serve as a reminder of her escape from slavery, her survival and rise to middle-class social status. Rising socio-economic classes, especially from as “low” as slavery, for a black woman during Trujillo was said to be impossible, for social mobility was only open for Dominicans who could portray having some ancestry of whiteness (Derby 120). “Kongoblack” Beli cannot pass for any form of whiteness, meaning her social mobility and survival are themselves symbols of resistance and

hope against Trujillato and their designated social hierarchies of race and gender. The circumstances behind the burning serves as a reminder of Beli's defiance: missing work to attend classes and being immensely stubborn, or rather, immensely defiant towards Dominican social norms.

Barring the scars of slavery and defiant black skin are symbols of Beli's history and the power she was able to grasp from it, yet Yuniór continuously mocks her survival. Yuniór goes as far as to say that her story resembles "one of Oscar's fantasy books, the orphan (who may or may not have a been the object of a supernatural vendetta) was sold to complete strangers in another part of Azua" (253). Comparing Beli's horrid childhood to a fantasy novel detracts from Beli's power, marking her life as unrealistic and unrelatable, as pure fantasy, which leads readers to take Beli's narrative as a work of fiction rather than the impactful truth and as a symbol of what is possible. In his characterization of Beli's life, Yuniór leads readers away from sympathy toward mass mockery and his dismissal of Beli's character becomes the readers'.

There are several critics who interpret Beli's character as nothing but a means to tell Oscar's story, or a conduit for the political history of the Dominican Republic during Beli's narrative. In his dissertation, Borges-Delgado sees Beli as "indistinguishable, the story of many other migrant narratives" and Harford Vargas discusses Beli as "upholding the regime with [her] passivity" (*Forms of Dictatorship* 45). These critics adapt the biased, hypermasculine perception of Beli and her body of Yuniór define her to nothing more than sexuality and breasts, a "passive" character, indistinguishable from any other migrant or Dominican mother. These analyses of *Oscar Wao* show how powerful Yuniór's influence is as a narrator – so powerful that even scholars accept his view of Beli. Such analyses have reinforced the way she is portrayed in the novel to the point that there is a lacuna of scholarship on her character and the deep history she

illuminates, both of which are important for understanding the role of hope and resistance in the context of the novel.

Beli's becomes the "Queen of Diaspora," "our girl," and "our Beli," nicknames Yuniór bestows upon her throughout the novel, and nothing more (176, 42, 56). Carpio argues that the references to "our girl," are signs of Yuniór's "tender possessiveness" of Beli and of "our story," (275) yet the plural "our" implies that Beli is not a singular person with her own value and important contributions to make the narrative, but rather the representative of *everyone*. She is everyone's queen, everyone's girl, which disappears her character. Rather than allowing her to be distinct and unique, she becomes the symbol for every migrant woman from the Dominican Republic, just as Borges-Delgado sees her. Her powerful narrative is lost within the novel because it serves only as the representative of Dominican history, not as a representative of her specific, gendered immigrant, violent and *particular* own story.

In his article, "Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," Sean P. O'Brien argues that Díaz requires his readers to "consciously deal with the challenges" of intertextuality and limited cultural knowledge of the Dominican Republic culture and language, revealing reader ignorance and the consequences of not researching the novel's intertextual and cultural contexts further (77). Although O'Brien focuses on the use of fantasy and Spanish language in his argument, a similar argument can be applied to the cultural context of Dominican gender norms under Trujillo. Limited knowledge of masculine gender norms under Trujillo eclipses the bias of Yuniór's narration and the way he frames Beli's character, which limits the analysis and understanding of the novel. The reader must consciously decide to look past the pornographic descriptions of Beli's breasts, past Yuniór's personal bias, to understand the power and hope Beli holds within her body and

narrative. Beli's survival through all of her trauma in the Dominican Republic *and* in the United States does not degrade her worth or create a target on her scarred back to mock and sexualize; rather, if read apart from framing, Beli becomes a symbol of defiance, power, and hope.

**CHAPTER 3. CENSORSHIP, ALLEGORY, AND SILENCE IN MAYRA MONTERO'S
IN THE PALM OF DARKNESS**

You never heard anything from the women.

--Mayra Montero, *In the Palm of Darkness*

Mayra Montero's 1997 novel *In the Palm of Darkness* is a non-linear and multilingual narrative that follows Dr. Victor Griggs, an American herpetologist, and his Haitian guide, Thierry Adrien, on their quest to find the endangered *grenouille de sang* or "blood frog."⁵ The narrative changes every chapter from Victor's perspective in search for the frog in 1992 to Thierry's story of his childhood in Haiti during the François and Jean-Claude Duvalier regimes. Thierry's narrative includes events such as being hired to find a lost German tourist woman in Casetaches Hill, his brother Julien becoming a *tonton macoute*⁶, and his friendship with Jasper Wilbur and Jasper's girlfriend, Ganesha. Punctuating these dueling narratives are short journal-like entries about frogs and extinctions, seemingly entirely separate from the main narratives. Unlike Díaz and Yuniors in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* who directly criticizes and discusses political oppression under Trujillato, neither Thierry nor Montero directly criticize the Duvalier regime, but the stories of his family's suffering are a critique of the politics and societal expectations of the time.

During one of Thierry's narrative chapters, he tells Victor that when he tells stories, "I always keep track of the ones in the background, the ones who disappear for no reason, the forgotten ones" (12). This sentiment is not only a reflection of his own interpretation of

⁵ The scientific name for the *grenouille de sang* was *Eleutherodactylus sanguineus* at the time of Montero's publication, but was later changed to *Pristimantis sanguineus* due to new scientific data (Hedges, Duellman and Heinicke).

⁶ A rural militia group instated by François Duvalier to gain control of rural countryside ("Silences Too Horrific" 78).

storytelling, but a message to Victor and to the reader to pay attention to and care for the people who are silenced and forgotten. Among the “silenced” in the novel are frogs. The herpetological journal entries of endangered and extinct frogs do not correlate with Thierry or Victor’s narratives; most do not include the discussion of endangered species in the Caribbean and seem to be included at random. The confusing frame and lack of connections creates silence surrounding the endangered species, giving the reader the option to ignore the topic rather than engage with it. Christopher Manes argues that, “nature *is* silent in our culture...in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject to jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (15). In addition, nature has historically been gendered as female⁷, adding a layer of complexity to the multiple silences of the narrative. Ecofeminist literary scholar Greta Gaard argues that the basic premise of the oppression of nature is the same ideology as that which sanctions the oppression of women (1). Gaard further explains that no attempt to liberate women will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature, and vice versa. The women’s stories in the novel, like the frogs’, are pushed aside to make room for Victor and Thierry’s dominant narratives. This non-linear structure narrative is purposeful because Montero frames women as background characters to display the silent suffering of women in Haiti in the mid to late twentieth century. Women are violated, beaten, and sexually harassed throughout the novel, yet no woman takes the stage as a main character, which further illuminates their oppression during this time period. It is the reader’s responsibility to interpret and understand Thierry’s narrative as more than commentary on his life in Haiti or as a way to add historical context to Victor’s frog catching expedition; acknowledging of the forgotten characters, the narrative point of view shifts to recognize the presence of Haitian women. I argue that the silent women in Montero’s work

⁷ The purpose of this analysis is not to perpetuate the role of women as nature or vice versa, but to engage with the perspective in order to examine the implications and consequences of the association.

accurately represents their condition during a Haitian regime that sought to make women submissive silent citizens.

To bring attention to the oppression of women in Haiti, the novel creates parallel narratives of the frogs Victor and Thierry hope to catch and women's oppression under the François and Jean-Claude Duvalier regime. Women in the novel, specifically the unnamed German tourist and Ganesha, are written in comparison to the endangered blood frog to demonstrate female oppression and the termination of their sexual freedom during the Duvalierist state. The unnamed German tourist's physical description and behavior are irrevocably similar to the blood frog, while Ganesha's relationship to her boyfriend, Jasper Wilbur, or "Papa Crapaud," is an allegory of capture. Through Thierry's narrative, women are labeled with animal-like features that illuminate their societal status during this time. Unlike other animal-political allegorical narratives like George Orwell's *Animal House*, the frogs in this novel are not anthropomorphized – instead, the women are zoomorphized. Although both women are deprived of sexual freedom and are horrifically violated by men, both regain some form of power and sexual authority during a regime that gendered state violence and treated women as enemies of the state. Similar to the argument in Chapter 2, the narrator, in this case Thierry, acts as a voice for the women *and* as a perpetrator of the gendered, state-sanctioned violence that he grows up in. The Haitian guide might acknowledge and keep track of the forgotten women, but he maintains violence and oppression by placing them in the background.

A brief history of sexual violations committed against women under the Duvalier regime explains the silence that dominates Montero's novel. Between 1957 and 1971, Haitian women experienced a drastic change in their societal role due to President François Duvalier's regime that terrorized the country. Before the dictator, women were defined as political innocents and

dependents, and therefore were exempt from state violence (Charles 139). However, during the first year of the dictator's presidency, women were granted the right to vote and became political citizens for the first time in the nation's history, although the consequences of citizenship far outweighed the benefits. According to Haitian historian Carolle Charles, women in Haiti were perceived as weak and submissive to men, but granting citizenship equalized their rights in society. To continue the previous paternalist discourse of the state and culture codes of Haiti, Duvalier turned to violence committed against women to reinstate masculine power (Charles 140). Central targets for violence, women were detained, tortured, exiled, raped, and executed to create power, domination, and fear of the Duvalierist state⁸. To carry out this violence against women, Duvalier created the *tonton macoutes*, a rural militia group ordered to gain control of the countryside, which used politically motivated rape to maintain power (Charles 140). According to Charles, "the Duvalierist state was a novelty because of the level of state corruption and the degree to which state violence was institutionalized" (139). Furthermore, Charles claims that "women who were not loyal to the Duvalierist cause were defined primarily as subversive, unpatriotic, and 'unnatural'" and became the enemy that Duvalier associated with his continuous proclamation, "my only enemies are those of my country" (140, 139). Donnette Francis reflects upon this claim when she argues that "sexual violence against women in Haiti operates through the politics of invisibility. Whether this violence is enacted by the state or through socialization practices, sexual violations against women get subsumed under a general discourse about violence" ("Silences" 78). By silencing and subsuming the sexual violence in the novel, Montero illuminates a history of undermining violence against women as general violence in the country.

⁸ Violence against women continued when François Duvalier's son, Jean-Claude, took office in 1971 after his father's death and continued until his overthrow in 1986.

In other words, Montero does not perpetuate women's silence, but rather brings to light their suppressed voices during a regime that brutally censored them.

Explicit opposition and criticism of the Duvalierist state continues to scare journalists and historians, like Leara Rhodes, for "concerns about being arrested, beaten or killed" if they critique past or present Haitian authoritarian governments (55). For fear of their safety, Haitian and non-Haitian journalists "still maintain self-censorship" when writing about Haitian politics or governments well into the 1990s, ten years past the end of the Duvalier regime (Rhodes 55). Scholarly critiques of Trujillato and other Caribbean dictatorships is abundant and vast, with historical and cultural perspectives to gain insight on the oppression created during these regimes, but scholarship on Haitian history is extremely hard to find because of censorship. Fear-induced self-censorship explains Montero's use of allegory as a mechanism of critique. Haitian sociologist, Anselme Remy, argues that criticism of Duvalier is "sheer ignorance," or "blind devotion to Western values," and notes that scholars should focus instead on Duvalier's attempt to raise the black middle class's socioeconomic standing at the time (38). The perception of imperialist western values in combination with Montero's outsider status as a Cuban-Puerto Rican marks her voice, and complicates any valid opinions and criticisms she has on the regime. Montero, a Caribbean journalist herself, possibly also practices self-censorship to ensure her safety and writes carefully because the exposure of censorship she endured during her childhood in Cuba under Fidel Castro's government, which also experienced unprecedented levels of media censorship (Carroll). Craig Hamilton argues that "when censorship is the problem, allegory may be the solution" and that "while one may challenge a regime either explicitly or implicitly, writing an allegorical text is one way to challenge a regime implicitly" (23-24). Montero's use of allegory creates a safety net to critique the regime implicitly, and gives her the voice, and by

extension the voice of her female characters, to portray the violence of the Duvalierist state against women by casting a light on the voiceless.

Silence and invisibility thus situate female narratives told through a Haitian man's perspective. The novel's frame resembles that of *Oscar Wao* because the women do not have the ability to voice their own stories; Thierry is able to express their narratives while simultaneously betraying how sexual violence has been normalized through his own behavior. Ángel A. Rivera argues that the silence in the novel "is not to mute ideas, but that it is more a type of resistance that communicates something" and that it is "is an invitation to read and make sense out of silence" (231). Silence as a form of resistance connects to Hamilton's argument on the use of allegory when presented with censorship: the silence communicates a voice of resistance and challenges the notion that women are the background of the novel because the oppression and silence of women and frogs become the primary focus of the entire novel. Through this lens, Thierry is a communicator of silence by acting as a storyteller of women's narratives and by his own silencing of and violence towards women: he is both narrator and perpetrator, demonstrating how the Duvalier regime's state-sanctioned violence reached many Haitian civilians, not solely those involved with the *tonton macoutes*.

Furthermore, the use of foreign characters does not eliminate the allegory of Haitian citizenship; rather, it demonstrates how the dictator's terrorizing politics and state sanctioned violence affected all who came into contact with it. When Thierry hears of the unnamed German woman who has gone missing, he notes:

You can't imagine how many women go out of their minds as soon as they set foot in Haiti, decent women who come for a little sun and end up on the burros with twisted hooves that go up to the Citadelle. It's the worst mistake they can make, because after

that, I don't know why, they come back deranged, their clothes all dirty and their eyes popping out of their heads; that's how they wander around the country, it makes you sick to see them. (25)

Thierry does not know why the Citadelle, a fortress built by leaders of the slave revolution in the early 1800s to defend themselves from the French, is a location of terror and derangement for women, but one can argue that it is the site's meaning of freedom that make women "go out of their minds" (25). The Citadelle represents the freedom Haitians fought for from the French, yet their fight for independence did not end there: since the revolution, Haitians have suffered under a U.S. imperialist occupation, been controlled by an onslaught of dictators, have been massacred by Dominican governments, and have watched their nation crumble under earthquakes. The Citadelle sits on top of a hill, but it overlooks the landscape of a country traumatized by war, violence, and death. The "decent" women who come to Haiti for a vacation are exposed to the unimaginable terror the country has suffered, which leaves them to wander around, unable to process the trauma.

To demonstrate the tourist's change from passive observer of oppression to that of a woman absorbed within the culture, the German woman is reduced from "decent" to a person who is "deranged" by her change from woman to frog. Thierry first recounts her story when he states that his father's zombie hunters⁹ were "waiting for a beast to appear, so when they saw her, they followed her for a while" (25). Immediately, the woman's description labels her as non-human, "a beast," which is extended by her desire to run away to the woods and caves of Casetaches Hill, a non-inhabited mountain outside of Jérémie. The woman is no longer

⁹ Zombies in Haiti are the product of spells and believed to be of West Africa origin brought to Haiti by slaves from that region. The concept of zombies would evolve further with the creation of the Vodou religion which is a prominent theme throughout *In the Palm of Darkness* (Moreman and Rushton 2).

associated with femininity or even a human being, but is reduced to an animal. Thierry's father instructs him to find the woman, not because of his experience in tracking people, but because of his experience in *frog* trapping on Casetaches. He packs his bags similar to that when he prepares for a frog trapping journey, even going as far as to pack "a jar with alcohol in case I saw a good frog" (28).

When Thierry first finds the woman on Casetaches immediately after seeing the blood frog, he describes that "my hands brushed something in the darkness, something soft and clammy, and I pretended it was the frog, the frog again, I told myself it was a frog so I wouldn't tell myself the truth: that the thing I touched was the instep of a foot, the living foot of a human being" (31). Thierry connects the woman's flesh with that of frogs to establish her as nothing more than a lost amphibian rather than a lost woman. The woman is further connected to the blood frog the moment Thierry sees her for the first time and describes her as "naked, her whole body streaming with water and blood, water from the rain and blood from who knows where" (31). The woman's description as wet and bloody might be read as simply as the result of the struggle to be in alone on a wild mountain, but the description reads similar to Thierry's first description of the blood frog only moments before: "with the gleam of the water, it seemed to me that yes, [the blood frog] did look like it was covered in blood" (31). The blood not only connects the woman to this specific frog, but also connects her to Haiti in general: although she runs to the mountains to cope with the horrors she saw at the Citadelle, she cannot escape the brutality the country has faced – she is *covered* in it. Thierry explains that her body was "streaming water and blood, water from the rain and blood from who knows where" as if the blood was not coming directly from her, but poured over her like rain (31). The violence and bloodshed Haiti has faced with colonization, slavery, and now with Duvalier coats the German

woman. The connection of blood to violence transfers to the blood frog as well, giving its disappearance a whole new meaning: the Haitian blood frog is disappearing, its voice and symbolism disappearing with it. To lose the blood frog is to extinguish the voices of those who have suffered from violence in Haiti, those who have bled. Montero cannot properly articulate the trauma that Haitian people suffered with description of historical background; rather, she has to use images of blood-soaked people and frogs to formulate even a glimpse into the devastation of Haitian history. The connection of the woman to the frog is important to understand how this violence specifically targeted women. The novel situates the frog's description next to the woman's to establish a connection between the two in this circumstance and in future moments of similar comparisons, like the woman drinking a *tulipe du mort* which are known to attract frogs by their smell¹⁰; and the lack of fear the woman has for the spiders on the mountain that demonstrates the mutualistic relationship between jungle spiders and frogs (Tsang).

The call of the frog and the sound of the woman draws a direct and clear connection as well. Thierry describes the frog call as unique, "kind of a *glug-glug-glug*, like the sound of a great bubble coming up from deep inside" (29). After Thierry finds the woman and returns her to her husband, she vomits and moans like "a putrid bubble boiled up from deep in her throat, it was like the song of the frog" (37). After Thierry makes the connection, the narrative transitions immediately to his return journey home, and the relationship between the woman and frog is not mentioned or explained further. Montero gives the reader a glimpse into the allegory of women's oppression, yet does not expand it. Like the German woman who visits the Citadelle, readers must engage with the injustice of Haiti in the novel to understand the full extent of oppression

¹⁰ The *Tulipe de mort*, which into "corpse flower," is a species of plants called *Amorphallus titanum* that grows in extremely humid temperatures and produces a smell similar to a rotting corpse to attract insects and small animals, like frogs (Hodge 47).

women face there. The silence of women speaks of injustices and violent trauma that words can only approach, never fully articulate.

Haitian women who were subjected to physical and sexual violence throughout the Duvalier regime experienced an extinction of their sexual citizenship. Donette Francis defines sexual citizenship as “sexual practices such as the freedom to choose to reproduce or not, the liberty of sexual expression and association, as well as the more conventional articulation of protection from sexual violence” (*Fictions* 4). By bringing attention to sexual citizenship, Francis argues that it illuminates the subtle ways sexual violence becomes normalized through rites of passage or dismissed as unnoteworthy, quotidian occurrences, such as the lack of protest or comments from Thierry or others when the husband slaps the German woman’s face when she returns to him. Attention to sexual citizenship, or lack thereof in the novel, is crucial in analyzing *In the Palm of Darkness* to further illuminate the state-sanctioned oppression of women during Duvalier’s regime.

The lack of sexual citizenship for the German woman is demonstrated through Thierry’s perspective her as a sexually deviant woman. When Thierry finds the woman he becomes confused because he “wondered how any man could go to so much trouble to hunt down a woman as homely as this one” and describes her as “so skinny she hardly had any breasts, seeing her naked was like looking at my little brother,” which illustrates a male fantasized perception of women that, if not met, associates the woman with a lack of sexual femininity and attractiveness (32). Dismissal of her womanhood creates another layer of silence and oppression, which Francis furthers explains by establishing that Caribbean womanhood “often emphasizes tropes of aberrant or absent sexuality, which effectively silences the sexual complexities of the interior lives of women and girls” (*Fictions* 9). When women, therefore, exercise erotic autonomy

outside the cultural tropes of sexuality, “it threatens to topple both the heterosexual and the nation” (*Fictions* 18). Francis’ theories explains Thierry’s acknowledgement of the German woman’s pubic hair, or rather, lack thereof, when he states that “a woman should have a bush of hair between her legs and under arms, and another on her head” (32). Lack of pubic hair on the German woman symbolizes a type of sexual autonomy that is outside the Haitian bounds of compulsory reproductive heterosexual erotic expressions. The German woman’s sexual citizenship, her right to sexually express herself through her body and actions, is taken away by the denouncement of her character not being worth the trouble to look for, due to her perceived lack of proper femininity. Her body is silenced and pushed aside, noted as unworthy and unnatural to demonstrate the marginalization of women and their bodies as a normalized societal habit in the novel.

The novel not only demonstrates the oppression of women through the policing of their bodies, but also through their relationship with men. Carolyn Merchant argues that with the emergence of the scientific revolution, “disorderly, active nature was soon forced to submit to the questions and experimental techniques of new science” by male scientists advocating for the control of nature for human benefit (164). Papa Crapaud, a scientist himself, displays this masculine control over the gendered environment by keeping his girlfriend, Ganesha, like a captured frog, thus normalizing his behavior and treatment towards her because she is dehumanized. When Papa Crapaud returns from a successful frog finding trip in Guadeloupe, Thierry recounts that “Papa Crapaud was very proud of the catch he had brought from Guadeloupe. But above all, he was proud of the woman he had found over there” (68). Papa Crapaud establishes Ganesha in the same context as the frogs he finds on the island. When he brings her back to Haiti, Papa Crapaud forbids Ganesha to leave the house or meet with other

people, trapping her by putting barbed wire on the windows and locking her in the house, as if she is a caged animal. Thierry explains that Ganesha tries to escape the house to seek out other men to have sex with, which is why Papa Crapaud has to trap her in a cage, but because Ganesha's voice and perspective is never given the harlotry that Thierry and Papa Crapaud blame her of might only be an excuse to keep her caged in. Papa Crapaud becomes a representation of the Duvalier regime because he, like the state, polices and violates women's bodies by labelling them as enemies.

In addition to policing her body, Papa Crapaud does not treat Ganesha like a person, but like an animal that keeps trying to escape. Thierry explains that "when you least expected it she would jump up and run out of the house, Papa Crapaud ran after her and shouted insults, shook her, grabbed her by the throat and dragged her back to his lair" (71). The relationship is not romantic or consensual, but more like a capturer and captive because of how Papa Crapaud treats Ganesha and in the way Thierry describes his home: a *lair*. The word "lair" is originally meant to describe "a wild animal's resting place, especially one that is well hidden," which creates yet another connection of Thierry's perspective of Ganesha and animals because Papa Crapaud takes Ganesha by the *throat* back home, like an animal taking their food back to their lair ("Lair"). Although it can be argued that Papa Crapaud, whose name translates to "Father Frog," is also associated with frogs, he is not equal to Ganesha because he maintains control over her by being her capturer, her owner, and "father."

Thierry furthers Ganesha's association with frogs when he describes the frogs Papa Crapaud brings back: "black frogs like thunderstorms. Pale frogs with eyes of an owl" and then only moments later, tells Victor that he had "never seen a woman like Ganesha with that same color, those same eyes" (68). Thierry does not elaborate on what color skin and eye combination

she possesses, but Thierry's description of frog skin and eye color positioned immediately before he describes Ganesha illuminates the reader on her physical characteristics: dark skin with light eyes. Sociologist H. Hoetink explains that unlike other Caribbean nations, the slavery, plantation economy and colonial history of Haiti caused a "generally more clear-cut" separation between black and white identities, which has resulted in fewer mixed-race physical traits in Haiti than in other Caribbean nations (59). As Chapter 2 explains, due to the African heritage of slaves in the eighteenth century, Haitians are typically darker-skinned than their lighter-skinned Dominican neighbors, creating institutionalized racism that was set by colonization. Dark skin with light eyes is an irregular feature to witness in Haiti, which explains Thierry's immediate mistrust of Ganesha and his label of her as unnatural and untrustworthy.

Ganesha's label as an unnatural woman that should not be trusted or cared for continues in not only Thierry's narrative, but also in Victor's. Whilst Victor thinks about his childhood on the ostrich farm, his narrative is interjected with Thierry's story about Ganesha's near-death experience. The narrative focuses on Victor and his own thoughts, while Ganesha's history of rape and attempted murder by an albino man is completely ignored. Victor does not comment on Ganesha's story, does not reflect on the horror she endures – rather, he continues to think about his family's ostriches (137-139). Thierry tells Victor that the man "beat her, he left her lying there in a pool of blood...he beat her because she let him fuck her," yet Victor's internal monologue does not react to the violent sex crime, focusing instead on the ostriches running on the farm (137). Francis explains that "sex specific crimes [in Haiti] are dismissed as universal or attributed to class" and due to Ganesha's amphibian label and oppressed status, the horrific crimes committed against her are overlooked ("Silences" 78). The juxtaposition between the focus on the ostrich farm and silenced narrative of Ganesha's rape and beating belittles her rape

as nothing more than background noise to Victor's thoughts. Although Thierry does voice the horrors Ganesha faces when being raped, he blames the rape and beating on Ganesha, not the man by claiming that "he beat her because she let him fuck her" (137). Dismissal of specific sex crimes continues past this narrative when Thierry explains that "later I found out [the albino man] had killed two women," which demonstrates Francis's argument that sexual violations against women "are not deserving of the state's immediate attention and reprisal" under the Duvalier regime (Montero 137, "Silences" 78). The unnatural label applied to women is a clear connection to Duvalier's regime where women, according to Charles, voice their political opinions in support of women's rights or the opposition party, they were defined as "subversive, unpatriotic and unnatural" (140). Both Ganesha and the German woman do not outwardly voice their political opinion or support of women's rights, but they defy the political party by attempting to be independent from men. The German woman runs away from her husband and when Thierry finds her "she knew [Thierry] was taking her to her husband and she didn't want to go back" (36). Women in Haiti at the time belonged to their husbands or fathers and did not have the freedom to be independent.

Thierry mentions that Papa Crapaud and Ganesha meet when she sells frogs at a kiosk in Guadeloupe and Papa Crapaud brought her back to Haiti, but there is no indication that she arrives in Haiti willingly. Her desire to run away, the risk being beaten and her "dirty habits" that Thierry mentions are not signs of erratic behavior, but of defiance. Thierry labels her "unnatural" because of her conscious insubordination. Supriya M. Nair argues that Caribbean homes are "never too disconnected from the history of slavery, servitude, violence, and exile" while "in a broader sense also signifies the nation" (49, 50). Through this lens, the violence that Ganesha

endures at the hands of Papa Crapaud signifies the violence that she, and other women, endure under the Haitian government at the time.

Thierry facing no consequences for raping Ganesha demonstrates the government-sanctioned violence against women in Haiti under Duvalier. Thierry uses his descriptions of Ganesha having multiple lovers and inviting any man into her home to excuse his own actions, but labelling a woman as promiscuous does not excuse rape. Thierry admits, “I came up behind Ganesha and put my arms around her. She twisted and tried to run away, I caught her at the door, raised her skirt...then I pushed her down on the floor” (71-72). The scene reads clearly as rape, yet there are no consequences for Thierry. Papa Crapaud questions Thierry, not on why he raped Ganesha, but on why he “fucked his Ganesha,” which not only dismisses Ganesha’s rape, but establishes Ganesha as Papa Crapaud’s property, as “*his* Ganesha” (72). Linden Lewis explains that Caribbean women’s sexuality “is still policed by social and gender conventions in ways that do not seem to constrain the behavior of men” (7). Ganesha is punished for her multiple sexual lovers, including those that she does not consent to, by being beaten and treated like a prisoner of Papa Crapaud’s home, whilst Thierry receives no repercussions for raping her; rather, he treats it as a rite of passage because “even [Thierry] wanted to know what that witch had between her legs” (71). Ganesha’s rape, portrayed through Thierry’s narrative, complicates his role as the conduit to understand woman’s oppression; he causes Ganesha’s suffering. The attention on Thierry rather than Ganesha can be read as a further perpetuating the normalization of sexual violence, but psychologists Fiorette Boonzaier and Cheryl de la Rey argue that when the victim’s account of rape and abuse is the main focus, it deflects attention away from the men who perpetuate this violence. Consequently, “woman abuse has come to be regarded as ‘woman’s problem’ – blaming women and rendering them responsible for change” (Boonzaier and de la

Rey 443). To transfer the focus on the perpetrator emphasizes Thierry's horrific act and places blame on the rape culture that the patriarchal regime creates, rather than placing responsibility on Ganesha to make a change for herself.

Prior to Duvalier's government, patriarchal cultural codes defined limits where women were exempted from state violence. The sexual violence against women in the novel demonstrates the change under Duvalier's government and the lack of sexual citizenship for women in Haiti. Women, like Ganesha and the German woman, were not exempted from state violence. The blood frog and other amphibians mentioned are constantly labeled as endangered or extinct species, and therefore, the women's parallel narratives with the amphibians marks the animal endangerment as their own. Animal rights scholar and law professor, Maneesha Deckha, demonstrates the importance of "situating animal oppression next to gender oppression and analyzing animal experience through a gendered specie analysis" (532). Not only can we associate animal oppression through the lens of the women, but also female oppression through the lens of the animals.

María Lugones explains that when we conceive oppressed people as something more than oppressed, it becomes possible to shift focus to resistance (749). Through this lens, we can see Ganesha's and the German woman's narratives as more than a mere reflection of the Duvalier regime, but as stories of resistance and power. By unveiling how oppression of women works in Haiti under Duvalier, Montero is able to break free of censorship constraints to show outsiders the mechanisms of oppression. The resistance of the regime comes through the defiant women and through the *telling* of these stories. Laura Halperin explains "hope exists in the attempts at resistance, however futile these attempts may be or seem. It exists in the sharing of often painful individual and collective *historias* and in the remembrance of harm in order to move past it and

seek to rectify it” (4). Hope and resistance in the novel are illuminated through Ganesha’s refusal to submit to Papa Crapaud and the German woman’s attempt to fight and flee from her husband and Thierry. Although they are punished for fleeing, fighting, and resisting the regime’s goal to mark women as submissive, natural citizens, they continue to resist in an effort to regain their sexual citizenship. Hamilton contends that allegories are a comprise of silence and explicit critique of a regime, and that allegories “require readers to ‘collaborate’ with writers in order to make meaning” (40). Hamilton’s allegory theory is represented through the women of the novel, who at first glance may seem to conform to government-issued silence, yet through their trauma is the critique of a regime that sought to make them submissive enemies of the state.

CHAPTER 4. SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF AND BY WOMEN IN CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *KING OF CUBA* AND *DREAMING IN CUBA*

“Cuban men could put up with untold shortcomings in a woman, but a flat ass wasn’t one of them. They felt a good culo to be their inalienable right, like access to potable water or a nightly shot of rum” (García, *King of Cuba* 41).

In Cristina García’s novel, *King of Cuba*, a woman’s body does not belong to her, but rather is a commodity for men to consume. In the quote above, a woman’s body is an “inalienable right” (40). Women are positioned as a resource, a product to buy, sell, and use, like water or rum, and such positioning negates their rights entirely because a woman is now used for men’s pleasure. In the above passage from García’s novel, El Comandante views a woman’s body as her only means of social status, and a woman’s bodily assets the only source of her value and function in Cuban society. El Comandante positions women’s place as sexual objects for men while presenting the idea that if a woman does not have the “assets” to be properly to be sexually objectified, she is not desirable nor is she a human being. He continues, stating, “a woman without an ass is called a rana, a frog. There was no worse insult” (*King of Cuba* 41). If a woman does not meet Cuban standards of sexualized beauty, she is not considered a person *or* a commodity, but even less than that – a frog. For all people, globally, there is no worse insult than to take away a person’s humanity. This moment of blatant sexual objectification of women is a fundamental part of *King of Cuba*, with both main narrators, El Comandante and Goyo Herrera, asserting a woman’s place in society is dictated by her bodily “assets.” If a woman is not sexually desirable, or more specifically, sexually desirable to El Comandante and Goyo, then her authority and power cease to exist. A woman’s body is currency and a symbol of social standing, but it is only through the male’s use of her body that a woman can be deemed worthy.

The marginalization, sexualization, and silence of Cuban women to further advance the interest of a patriarchal society run by dictator Fidel Castro form the critical backdrop to García's *King of Cuba* and *Dreaming in Cuban*. The national narratives are juxtaposed as *King of Cuba* describes Cuban and Cuban American culture during Castro's last years from the perspectives of men while *Dreaming in Cuban* tells it from the viewpoint of women throughout Castro's first years of the revolution and into the early 21st century. By reading these novels together, the texts complement one another to form an overview of Cuban life during the 20th century through the eyes of those who found success during Castro's reign and those that suffered the consequences of his tyranny.

The novels' complementary styles derive from their narrative forms. As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, *King of Cuba* is a linear and shared narration between two men over the span of three months; *Dreaming in Cuban* takes place over fifty years and contains the voices of seven people who are heard through first-person narration, third-person, and letters, creating a non-linear frame. Together, these novels argue that men's perspective of Cuban culture under Castro requires only two narrators who parallel one another, while those oppressed in *Dreaming in Cuban* requires a complicated, messy and polyphonic narrative that includes the perspectives of multiple women from multiple generations. Donnette Francis comments on complicated Caribbean female narratives, suggesting "that neither a chronological telling of events nor one of geographical space can explain the complexities of these women's lives" ("Silences" 76). The women in *Dreaming in Cuban* require different time frames and intergenerational overlapping narrative to communicate the complexity of normalized and internalized women's oppression and sexual violence, while the men in *King of Cuba* need only two irrevocably similar voices to

show the privilege of a patriarchal society. The marginalization of women is not only reflected within the stories of the characters, but also by how the stories are *told*.

García states in an interview with Simon and Schuster Publishing that she purposefully marginalized the voices of women in *King of Cuba* to showcase the identity of older Cuban men “who grew up in a culture of sexism—and a certain chivalry as well—so ingrained that they never deeply questioned it, even when their own daughters rebelled against them or criticized their actions” (*King of Cuba* 240). Although García’s *King of Cuba* and *Dreaming in Cuban* are portrayals of hypermasculine Cuban culture and the consequences of that culture for women, there are moments when women create power and autonomy for themselves despite being sexually objectified and marginalized. Women take control over their own bodies and sexual expression in active resistance against Cuba’s hypermasculine regime, but the participation in a sexualized culture can perpetuate problematic views of sexuality. To gain sexual power despite a culture that has normalized sexual objectification and violence complicates women’s autonomy: these women must survive the abuse, sexual objectification, and in many cases, rape, in order to use their sexuality to gain power over men through sexual objectification. Women’s rights and autonomy of herself are limited in the interest of men, which leaves them with little to no options to establish authority in their society. Therefore, women in *King of Cuba* and *Dreaming in Cuban* must internalize the normalized sexual objectification and violence, and use it for their own advantage on men, further perpetuating a culture of sexual objectification. Acts of resistance and female empowerment through sexuality is further illustrated in *Dreaming in Cuban*, to portray the power women hold in a country ruled by a patriarchal government, but *King of Cuba* serves as the example of the cultivation of normalized hypermasculine sexual culture.

King of Cuba switches between the narratives of Goyo Herrera, an eighty-six-year-old Cuban exile living in Miami, and El Comandante, an eighty-nine-year-old Cuban dictator who resembles Fidel Castro. Both men reflect on their ageing bodies and minds, their past and current lovers, their disappointing family members, and the legacies they will leave. Their narratives intersect due to Goyo's dream of becoming a hero for the exiled Cuban community by assassinating the dictator, yet the two never see or speak to one another until (spoiler!) the last chapter where Goyo shoots El Comandante at a United Nations speech. Like Beli in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the women portrayed in the novel – their wives, lovers, and daughters – are solely positioned by the men as objects to sexualize, marginalize, or criticize. The oppression of women in the novel is not meant to dismiss the women or to further participate in ownership of their bodies, but to bring attention to their suffering and understand how women regain control of their sexuality from men who seek to control and own it.

The internalized culture of sexual objectification and marginalization in the novels are a reflection of Castro's government, which ran on a platform of women's marginalization, camouflaged as women's rights. This is similar to the Duvalier regime mentioned in Chapter 3 – Duvalier masked his campaign of promising equal rights for women, but actually did so to sanction violence against women. Castro's reign started during the Cuban Revolution, during which one of his platforms called for the improvement of women's rights to "transform a society to such an extent that women would be liberated from oppression, exclusion, and prejudice" (Chase 1). According to feminist historian Michelle Chase, after the revolution ended, Castro announced that he and his government had indeed accomplished their goal, calling achievements in women's rights "a revolution within the revolution" (1). Chase argues that women's "liberation" from oppression, exclusion, and prejudice was much more complex: women were

actively involved in guerilla movements and anti-Fulgencio Batista groups, but Castro considered women as “useful” and did not view them as “an aggrieved constituency” (116). Women were therefore seen as a commodity and a useful tool in the revolution, not as leaders of a triumphant revolution. It is true that women actively took part in leadership roles and became a larger part of the labor force, but the nation “repeatedly expressed opposition to the idea of women performing ‘rough’ work, such as agricultural labor, which they viewed as defeminizing and therefore threatening to existing gender roles” (Chase 193).

Existing gender roles, especially in regard to family structure and sexuality, continued to dominate Cuban culture. The claim that women were liberated from oppression and prejudice was simply a claim: female autonomy was not a distinctive feature in women’s rights in the years following the revolution. Women were still expected to follow the rules set by their male relatives and were not able to freely walk the streets of Cuba, since it was believed that women “would naturally fall prey to sexual advances of men in public settings without the protection of their male relatives” (193). This is not to say that the revolution did not change women’s rights in Cuba for the better, but as Chase explains, it also did not completely liberate them and create complete equal rights for women. Women were still oppressed by a patriarchal society that stressed “the importance of female virginity, the patriarchal protection of dependents, and the social centrality of family” (73). Women were bound by a culture of heteronormative reproduction that did not create room for sexual freedom and expression. The perception of women’s sexuality, or lack thereof, was a central component in keeping women’s rights and autonomy stagnant: women were expected to remain virgins until marriage yet willing participants in sexual intercourse when given the opportunity.

King of Cuba revolves around the cultural belief that women are willing to be participants of any sexual act offered by a powerful man. This perception not only demonstrates a culture created by male-dominated ideas, but also illustrates how women are constantly degraded as sexual objects by those who seek power and need to prove their masculinity. Throughout his narrative, El Comandante reflects on and boasts about his multiple past lovers, from long-standing extramarital affairs to sleeping with a stewardess who competed in Miss Latin America 2006, while priding himself on the fact that “No woman—not even the greatest soprano in the world—was out of his reach” (147). He sees women as a challenges and playthings for him to use and dispose of, and does not treat them as full persons. El Comandante extends his reign as dictator of a nation to mark women as a type of national commodity to own since no woman “was out of his reach” (147). His comments towards women based on their appearances and sexual assets defines, confines, and dehumanizes women as objects and toys. Supriya Nair argues that literary dictators who have women available to them on demand based solely on their appearance “echoes the slave master’s arbitrary sexual access to slaves, proving that dictatorships have something in common with slave regimes” (54). El Comandante is the slave owner of Cuban women, using them on his own terms.

El Comandante’s perception of women as sexual objects originates from his rejection of the *barbudo* persona, the ideal archetype of Cuban Revolution warriors. According to Chase, the image of the *barbudo* included the growing of beards, Catholic devotion, and “resonated with existing masculine ideals such as sexual and military discipline, and righteous violence and deliverance” (71). During the revolution, Castro associated himself with the *barbudo* image to transmit a message of strength and courage and to attract a greater number of supporters, but once firmly in power, Chase argues that he rebelled against the religious, military, and sexual

discipline typical of such a role by no longer wearing religious medallions and having numerous extramarital affairs. Castro's rejection of the *barbudo* image is reflected in *King of Cuba's* El Comandante: García comments on the character's resemblance to Castro, stating that she researched everything she could on Castro, even going as far as to write El Comandante's gestures and speeches similar to the tyrant's, and "shelved all the facts about Castro and tried to create as fully fledged and human a tyrant as [she] could" (*King of Cuba* 240). Castro's known rejection of the *barbudo* culture is reflected within the character of El Comandante, such as El Comandante's constant discussion about his sexual history: he rejects the image that resonated with Cubans that won him power in the country, similar to how Castro presented himself after becoming Prime Minister. They both disavow the values of the citizens that granted them power to pursue their own personal interests.

Denial of Cuban values for personal gain continues throughout El Comandante's narrative with the rejection of Cuban sexual reform. Ian Lekus notes that mid-twentieth century Cuba was a site for tourism that included a highly sexualized, sinful image, which led to the revolution instituting a platform to eradicate the association that Cuba was a site for provocative tourism, especially for Americans (73). Lekus argues that sexual reform became a central symbol for the revolution and its rejection of American ideals, yet in García's narrative El Comandante continuously affiliates Cuba with sexuality. He boasts about entertaining a Venezuelan dictator with "the best goddamn rum, cigars, lobsters, and pussy on the blue-green planet" (*King of Cuba* 27). Rather than keeping his revolution promise of eradicating the oversexualized portrayal of Cuban women, El Comandante displays Cuba as a sexual tourist destination with the best "pussy on the blue-green planet" (27). El Comandante rejects the sexual reform he promised because his own sexual desires of treating women as objects to be bought, sold, and used for entertainment,

which positions women with the same value as cigars. The women are further degraded as objects by El Comandante's reduction of women to "pussy," a metonymy which reduces women solely to their sex.

The blatant sexual objectification and marginalization of women is an integral part of El Comandante's character and the novel as a whole, while the women are silenced. Absurd comments about the feel of flight stewardess' fake breasts, of ballerina's being "inhibited in bed, too critical of their bodies," or of older women needing to be viewed fully clothed or in the dark are woven seamlessly into the narrative to show how such degrading comments are interlaced within the El Comandante's Cuban culture (95). El Comandante's personal comments and thoughts are not shared with the women, which leaves them unable to voice their own opinions of the dictator or to respond to his demoralizing comments. This treatment and portrayal of subservient, silent women by El Comandante illuminates the hypermasculine Cuban culture that Castro instigated and took part in for his own personal sexual interests.

Although Goyo Herrera's narrative is meant to juxtapose El Comandante's, Goyo's treatment of women mirrors that of the dictator. Goyo might loathe El Comandante for exiling him to the U.S. and for terrorizing his home country, but their actions and comments about women reflect one another. Ironically, Goyo's hatred for the dictator does not stand on politics alone, "but for his mistreatment of the woman Goyo had loved above all others: Adelina Ponti" (11). Adelina was a pianist that involved herself with both Goyo and then, according to Goyo, "fell under the tyrant's spell" (69). Adelina becomes pregnant with the dictator's son but El Comandante does not recognize the child as his own and when Adelina commits suicide, Goyo blames El Comandante and Goyo's hatred begins. El Comandante abuses power over women

and their bodies, yet the tragedy of Goyo's narrative is that he also perpetuates the culture of viewing women solely as a means of sexual pleasure.

Goyo's history with women resembles that of El Comandante: both are married to women who stay with them after the discovery of the men's affairs, and both view women as a nothing more than sexual objects. Goyo admits that he feels ashamed after meeting with one of his lovers, Vilma, but that "shame was erotic" (83). Jennifer Harford Vargas comments on Goyo's love affairs when she states that "the bodies of women serve as the stage on which Goyo exercises his masculine hero fantasies" when he does not have the chance to play out his fantasy of killing El Comandante (*Forms of Dictatorships* 156). He uses women to feel masculine in his ailing body and to mitigate his inability to kill El Comandante. This masculine need is fulfilled by Goyo's objectification of women, and for Goyo, "every woman had something: a graceful neck, fetching knees, sultry lips. Even as a young man, he'd preferred his lovers maduritas. In his opinion, women were at their best after forty" (83). Every woman has a physical trait *for Goyo* to sexualize, as if every woman was meant for Goyo to admire and own. Goyo does not reflect on any other characteristic of a woman other than the physical qualities she possesses that are best suited for sex, and specifically, sex with *him*.

Goyo might use women to fulfill his hero masculine fantasies, but the women are able to use Goyo for their own autonomy. One of the women he meets often is Vilma, a bank teller whose body, according to Goyo, "was a form of genius particular to Cuban women, expressly designed to torment every male beholder" (82). Comments beyond those about Vilma's body and sexual appetites are not present, which paints her as an object for Goyo to use for his own pleasure. Linda LeMoncheck argues that the objectified woman "becomes sexy by becoming less-than-man" and that "the erotic nature of the encounter, its very sexiness, is grounded in and

predicated upon the woman's lack of equal worth" (Cahill 10). Vilma's sexuality is used against her own personhood, degrading her from person to sexual object of less worth to amplify Goyo's sexual encounter, yet Vilma takes control of every sexual situation she encounters with Goyo. She contacts him to meet up, sets the location and time, and additionally she is the one who controls their sexual intercourse. When they do meet, Goyo states that "Vilma would probably want another quickie in his Cadillac. Lately, she'd been insisting on elaborate role play" (80). Although Goyo uses her to boast his own masculinity, Vilma is constantly the one in charge of their fantasies, their rendezvous, and their actions. The mistress uses Goyo's sexual attraction to her for her own advantage by playing out her own fantasies and desires on her own terms. Furthermore, when they do engage, Goyo states that "in her merciless beige dress, so tight it looked like a lusciously dimpled second skin, Vilma could ask nothing of Goyo that he wouldn't willingly, gratefully, give" (83). Goyo continues to value Vilma only for her body, but there is a power that Vilma gains when Goyo becomes vulnerable to her attire and sexual desires: she could ask anything of him, and he would grant it. She takes control to gain her own autonomy and power with a man who only uses her for her body. Later, Goyo reminds himself to "transfer gratitude money to his mistress Vilma's account," which showcases how Vilma truly does take advantage of her situation (83). Goyo's use of the term "mistress" is problematic in this context because it implies romanticizing the situation between himself and Vilma. Vilma is a Cuban immigrant who lives by herself on a single bank teller salary in Miami, so the extra money she gains by engaging in a type of sex work with Goyo might keep her safe and stable. Her arrangement of this relationship is not romanticized; rather, is used for survival. Goyo's use of "mistress" might only apply to the earliest definitions of the term, which linguist Ben Zimmer defines as "the feminine form of master" (Vigeland). Vilma's body may only be used for sex and

her character belittled by Goyo, but Vilma is also the feminine master of the relationship, authorizing control and benefits for herself.

Although Vilma uses Goyo's attraction to her for her benefit, it complicates the objectification of women because Vilma *needs* to be objectified and treated like a sexual object to gain those benefits. Vilma becomes the object that men see and want while simultaneously using Goyo for sex, but Goyo is not treated like an object. Cahill argues that in sex work, the client "is not constructed as a sex object, either by the sex worker or, indeed, by society itself. First, he is surely not primarily seen as a thing-for-sex. If anything, he is seen as a source of income" (111). This is yet another aspect of the deep and sustained inequality that not only runs through worker/client relationships in sex work, but also the inequality between men and women. Although Goyo could be considered Vilma's "client," he still maintains power and status over her.

Power in situations that seem to be controlled by men are also integral aspects of the del Pino women's lives in *Dreaming in Cuban*. The novel reflects the tones of *King of Cuba* to portray of a society that generally does not give women power or voice in any situation. *Dreaming in Cuban* takes on a different approach on women's oppression by narrating the novel through mostly women's point of view, which demonstrates the consequences women suffer from being sexually objectified by men like El Comandante and Goyo. The novel is a multigenerational, polyphonic, nonlinear narrative that challenges the constructed ideas of Cuban gender roles as each member of the del Pino family shares their story through their fragmented memory or the memory of others. The memories arise from Celia, her two daughters, Felicia and Lourdes, her granddaughter, Pilar, as well as Celia's son, other granddaughters and grandson. Each family member's narrative begins at different moments in their lives that seem

disconnected, yet are interwoven within one another's to form a more comprehensive narrative of Cuban and Cuban American lives during and after the Cuban Revolution. Celia's narrative focuses on her letters to a past Spanish lover as well as her erotic devotion to Castro; Lourdes moves to New York to start a successful bakery business after being raped by a Cuban soldier; and the contraction of syphilis from her first husband complicates Felicia's narrative with the development of mental illness that leaves her unable to remember months or years at a time. The individual narratives of these women connect through the discussion of imperialism, dictatorship, resistance, patriarchy, transnationalism, mental illness, race, gender and sexuality, yet ironically, no subject is addressed outright. Silence provides autonomy and extends a voice for these women.

Dreaming in Cuban mirrors *King of Cuba* because they both depict a continued female oppression through patriarchal gender norms that was supposed to be eradicated by the revolution. Women's oppression is most evident through Celia's experience as a judge for the People's Court, in which she presides over a case that involves Ester Ugarte's claim that another woman, Loli Regalado, seduced her husband, Rogelio Ugarte, while Loli testifies that Rogelio held her against the wall and tried to rape her. Celia laughs at Ester for the accusation that Loli seduces Rogelio by wearing a seductive shirt and "the audience erupts with laughter" (113). Loli is not perceived as a rape victim in the trial and the accusation of a marital affair and rape are made into a spectacle. Furthermore, accusing Rogelio of rape seems to be a normal affair, for everyone in Santa Teresa del Mar knows that "Rogelio Ugarte, like his father and his father before him, cannot keep his unguaranteed hands to himself. It's a genetic trait, like his widow's peak and his slow brown eyes" (113). Rape is understood as trait passed down through generations of men who do not suffer any consequences for their actions, which further illuminates the problem

that female oppression did not end with the revolution; rather, the disturbing patriarchal discourse still courses through Cuban culture in the novel. Men and their sexual deviances are something to disregard and accept while women are silenced and ignored after sexual harassment. To further showcase that rape and marital affairs are “hardly more than an occasion for a live soap opera” in the novel, Loli testifies that she simply went to the Ugarte household to borrow flour and Rogelio admits that he did try to rape Loli, or in his defense, calls it “seduction;” as a result, Celia only sentences Rogelio to one year of volunteer work at a women-run daycare (115). Celia almost seems to reward Rogelio with the chance to be around more women rather than truly punish him for his attempted rape of Loli. Celia’s explanation of Rogelio’s sentence also reads as a reward when she tells Rogelio, “you will be the first man to ever work there, *compañero*, and I will be checking up to see that your behavior is one of a model Socialist man in all respects” (116). Celia does not tell him what behaviors she expects him to change, how to make those changes, or any consequences that Rogelio might face if he does not meet the “model Socialist man” standards. Celia might have the authority to judge the People’s Court, but she does not have the power to make social or cultural changes within her community; rather, she must still abide by patriarchal discourses that course through the culture in the novel.

Celia, as well as her daughters, Lourdes and Felicia, do not have authority as women to take down generations of patriarchal discourse and culture, yet Felicia and Lourdes find autonomy through their sexual relations. Felicia realizes that she can use her body to gain the favor of men and in turn, secure safety and stability in her society: in her teenage years she leaves high school to take up a job as an escort and as an adult she marries three men whom she seduces to secure economic safety and stability. She finds economic stability with her first

husband, Hugo, but is not granted sexual autonomy. Although Hugo enjoys being tied up and slapped across the face when he is involved with Felicia, which could signify Felicia's power during their sexual intercourse, it is under *his* terms when *he asks*, and Felicia "learns how to please *him*" (80, *emphasis mine*). Hugo treats Felicia like El Comandante and Goyo treat women: like a sexual object to use only when they desire it. Adding to Felicia's sexual mistreatment from her first husband, Felicia contracts syphilis from Hugo, which begins her struggles with mental illness and reckless behavior. Hugo strips Felicia of her autonomy over her body, both sexually and her physical health, which leaves Felicia without an ounce of control in her own skin.

But Felicia learns to take back the control of her own body with her second and third husband. When she meets her second husband, Ernesto, she is quick to pronounce him her future husband, while she "opens the rear door of her vintage American car and slides across the backseat, gently tugging Ernesto with her... She pulls him toward her and it begins to rain, a hard afternoon rain that is rare in winter" (149). Although Felicia and Ernesto quickly consummate their marriage, it is now under *Felicia's* terms, not her husband's. She is the one who tugs Ernesto into the car, pulls him towards her which showcases not only her autonomy over her sexual desire, but the power dynamic in their relationship: Felicia is not only the one in charge of her own body, but also in their relationship.

After Ernesto's sudden death, Felicia succumbs to a psychiatric episode that makes her forget the past few months and she wakes up to her third husband, Otto. Otto is a carnival mechanic that "thinks his wife is crazy and beautiful and mysterious and he will do just about anything she asks," yet does not ask Felicia for her consent when he forces her to perform oral sex on him on top of a Ferris wheel (154). Although Felicia does not remember meeting or marrying her husband, she knows that her body is her own to do as she pleases. When Otto

forces himself on her on top of the Ferris wheel, “Felicia closes her eyes as the car begins to fall” and “when she opens them, her husband is gone” (155). In her own narrative sections, it is not explicitly stated that Felicia pushes her husband to his death, but later in her another chapter narrated by her friend, Herminia Delgado, Felicia tells her “that she’d pushed this man, her third husband, from the top of a roller coaster and watched him die on a bed of high-voltage wires” (185-186). Felicia’s violent actions towards her third husband are extreme, yet the physical and mental trauma she suffers from at the hands of her first husband, her second husband’s sudden death, and being sexually assaulted by her third husband *are* extreme. Her mental health causes her to be irrational and reckless, causing her to kill Otto, yet doing so illustrates the extremes that women suffer to gain autonomy in the novel.

Obtaining power and autonomy after being victim to sexual harassment and trauma presents itself in Felicia’s sister, Lourdes, as well in Cuba, Lourdes is violently raped by two Cuban soldiers who beat her with their rifles and scratch “crimson hieroglyphics” on her stomach with a knife, forcing her to move out of Cuba to escape the trauma she suffers at the hands of the men who are supposed to protect their country and fellow citizens. Lourdes’ violent rape is not reported to the police or mentioned to her family members because she understands that rape, like the one attempted on Loli, is “no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day” (227). To cope with her trauma that cannot be voiced and cared for in a patriarchal-run dictatorship, Lourdes escapes to New York to build her career as a baker. There, Lourdes builds a career for herself and a position of power over her body through sex with her husband.

Lourdes’ life in New York is not all pleasant: she develops an eating disorder, creates a strenuous relationship with her daughter, and imagines and talks to her dead father for years after his passing, yet the power of her sexuality emerges. Lourdes reflects that her weight gain causes

her sexual appetite to increase as well: she calls on her husband, Rufino, constantly to satisfy her needs by summoning him from his workshop at any hour of the day (21). Her desire for sex grows, while “Rufino’s body ached from the exertions” and “he begged his wife for a few nights’ peace, but Lourdes’s peals only became more urgent, her glossy black eyes more importunate” (21). Like Felicia, Lourdes demands sex on her own terms, which gives her authority and power over a body that continues to grow with her eating disorder and declining mental health. She possesses power through a body that was taken and silenced by the violent rape she suffered at the hands of soldiers. Her body is now *hers* to own and submit to, rather than violated by men.

All the del Pino women in *Dreaming in Cuban* suffer the consequences of sexual objectification and violence in Cuba during Castro’s dictatorship: Celia cannot deliver justice for a woman who is sexually violated; Felicia is raped and abused by her husbands and must seek justice in her own hands; and Lourdes’ must turn to sex in order to cope with the violent rape she faced at the hands of Cuban soldier. Lourdes and her daughter, Pilar, immigrate to the United States but still cannot escape the trauma that echoes throughout the generations of their family. But through the violent and horrific occurrences the women face, there is a continuous discourse of family, love, and support, even in the midst of tragedy. Lourdes successfully runs her bakery in New York; Celia is reunited with her granddaughter; and Felicia finds happiness with her religion and son. Acts of love and family are central in the novel, but the violence these women suffer through coats the novel with a layer of devastation that is incapable of being ignored by readers and the characters.

Reading *Dreaming in Cuban* and *King of Cuba* together not only displays a more comprehensive view of the Castro patriarchal Cuban culture that oppressed women, but also

disrupts dominant discourses about women's sexuality and power. García emphasizes the hypermasculine culture in her novel to accentuate the amount of power and complex cultural acumen needed by women to disrupt that culture for their own benefit. While *King of Cuba* is narrated from a male perspective, the representation of women punches through the story to dominate the narrative. Women in this novel hold power and authority over men who control them, dictate them, and in some ways, own them. *Dreaming in Cuban* complements *King of Cuba* in its portrayal of women's sexual objectification to showcase women's voice and perspective on their social status, yet powerfully displays the control and authority women are able to gain in a society that sets women up to fail and be subservient to men. Displays of authority through sex complicates the perpetuation of using women as sexual objects, but such acts are formative in shaping the complexities of marginalized women authorizing control for themselves. In focusing on such scenes of sexual power through sexual objectification, García gives voice to women whose ambivalent sexuality challenges sexual hierarchies and demonstrates the multiple and complex ways in which Cuban women must sacrifice themselves to the male gaze to gain autonomy over their own bodies.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: DISRUPTING THE SILENT PARADISE

For this thesis, I originally sought to answer the question: how do Caribbean women *directly* rebel and defy patriarchal regimes that sexually oppress them? However, it became deeply complicated when a direct, clear-cut answer I hoped to find could not be found in any of the texts I read. Not only was it hard to analyze clear defiance, but it was difficult to understand how the dictatorships created and maintained systems of women's oppression. Díaz, Montero, and García write to encourage readers, including myself, to work hard in search for the answers embedded in their complicated language, non-linear narrative frameworks, and vague allusions, in part because they do not want to perpetuate the stigma of consuming Caribbean products, bodies, and countries as a form of enjoyable leisure, yet at the same time, they want their readers to know about the devastation these countries have faced and forms of trauma that cannot be articulated clearly or neatly 300 pages. Supriya Nair's comment cited earlier in this thesis about people not considering Caribbean literature as "enjoyable" speaks true about these authors: they do not want their novels to be enjoyable; rather, they want it to be disruptive. Reading violent narratives is not meant to be enjoyable, but it also cannot be ignored because one of the things these writers declare is that the Caribbean is not the paradise image readers would rather imagine. Throughout writing this thesis, I realized that the defiance against terrorizing patriarchal dictatorships takes place in the writing of the novels themselves and in advising readers who then undertake the responsibility to research and write about them. A clear relationship between the novel and the reader is established through these texts in order to create a dialogue about these authors, texts, Caribbean nations, and how Western society sanctions the oppression of women.

While writing this thesis, I battled with myself to strike a balance: balance between showing the reality of the oppression of women in these novels, with their continual efforts to

fight against regimes and search for avenues to assert agency and power. I did not want to perpetuate the idea that these island nations were paradises for all citizens, but I also did not want to label these nations as completely chaotic or uncivilized. I wanted to show that the novels portray the reality for women living under dictatorships, but I was also aware that readers need to understand how powerful and amazing the women in these novels must be just to *survive* in societies that normalize violence against women

When I could not always find direct moments of defiance in these novels, I then searched for direct evidence of hope for these women – hope for themselves, their communities, or for women in general in each nation to show how although these women are oppressed, there are glimmers of optimism. However, I realized I confronted the same problem as before: like searching for a direct rebellion, the hope of freedom from oppression was not always present either. My claim that there are clear moments of hope and freedom in all of these novels became problematic because women on these islands still continue to be oppressed long after the dictators' reign ended. The end of each novel did not perpetuate a happy-ending cliché, but ended with the death of main characters, with destruction, and with heartbreak, which communicates that the lives of these characters, these women, do not have a happy endings either. Although their novels are fictional, Díaz, Montero, and García make it clear that the nations' history and culture are a reality for women in the Caribbean, and this reality often does not always include happy endings. Like the defiance found in these novels, the hope comes from the writing itself: communicating to those outside of the Caribbean about oppressive regimes and violence against women in order to create an understanding and sympathy for the victims of dictatorships. Hope is created by telling the history of these islands and more about the lives of these women, because their voices are no longer silenced.

The foundation of this thesis originated from the fact that the Caribbean continues to be an understudied region of literature, history, and politics in Western education. Like Díaz, Montero, and García, my purpose was to bring to light the cultural shifts the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba experienced under dictators and how those shifts specifically targeted women. It is within the knowledge of the islands' history and politics that we can clear through the maze of each novel, but as readers we must take on the responsibility to educate ourselves and others in order to not only appreciate Caribbean literature, but to learn from it. An academic and scholarly shift needs to occur in reading Caribbean literature and other understudied regions; we cannot learn from only reading enjoyable literature, but we must also be exposed to literature that is, quite frankly, disturbing. To read and interact with these novels is to keep the important discussion about the Caribbean and Caribbean women alive, giving them a space to make their stories heard.

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