LATINA/CHICANA MOTHERING

edited by

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Contesting the Meaning of Latina/Chicana Motherhood

Familism, Collectivist Orientation, and Nonexclusive Mothering in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*

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Motherhood and the act of mothering are not exclusive to biological mothers nor simply determined by gender. Not all women are mothers, while those who are mothers do not all mother; the father–mother dyad as the traditionally alleged norm in conceiving and raising children has to coexist with other discourses of parenting in the 21st century: homosexual parents, single mothers, divorced or separated couples, and foster and extended families. This recent parenting allows for greater flexibility in the exploration of the maternal discourse in the post-millennium as socially constructed and not biologically inscribed (Waterman 24; Glenn 3); yet, our social values that (re)position women within national mythologies are not easily dismantled (Mostov 89).

According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), women are often romanticized as mothers in their personification of “devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love” (116). Jean F. O’Barr, Deborah Pope, and Mary Wyer add that they are seen as being “endlessly loving, serenely healing, emotionally rewarding” (O’Barr et al. 14). Responding to the mythical concept of the “Ideal Mother,” a mother is omnipotent and “sees, understands and fulfils her children’s every need” (Leira and Krips 87); however, she can also be “demonized as smothering, overly involved, and destructive” (Glenn 11; Chodorow and Contratto 56–7). The existence of mothering myths further counteracts women’s efforts to break away from Western discourses on “good mothering”; women’s failed attempts to simulate the “magical fantasy mother” frustrate them in their fear of falling outside the paradigms that socially determine good or bad parenting; such myths propagate
archetypal gender roles and therefore aide in the internalization of a fictitious image of “good motherhood,” which may hinder both balance and harmony in mother-daughter relationships and women’s sense of self-worth as mothers.

This essay explores the various concepts of the maternal in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) as a construct that challenges conventional motherhood imagery in order to offer new approaches to theorizing the Latina maternal experience. The portrayal of motherhood in García’s novel offers new insights to conceptualize motherhood since Latina/Chicana families are “characterized by a unique constellation of features derived from their socially and historically specific context” (Segura and Pierce 64). Furthermore, *Dreaming in Cuban* is illustrative of how this “constellation” of a tumultuous history of politics in Cuba and in the Diaspora disrupts the mother-daughter dyad, further challenging other contemporary Latina/Chicana constructs such as “familism,” *compadrazgo*, “collectivist orientation,” and “nonexclusive mothering” (Segura and Pierce 64; Mirandé and Enríquez 98, 107).

**THE LATINA/CHICANA (M)OTHER(ING) EXPERIENCE: FAMILISM AND THE DEL PINO WOMEN**

Up until the 1950s, theoretical approaches to family and family values perceived the family as a conjugal nuclear institution in which the relationship between husband and wife was central to the rapport between mothers and children. Although after the 1950s the concept of family values entered into a crisis, such a romanticized ideal of the family and the sexual division of labor persisted as a way of empowering men and disempowering mothers and children (Jagger and Wright 9). From the 1960s onwards, different perspectives on mothering have shown a continuous evolution in the conception of the various meanings of motherhood for different social agents: from the social psychology tradition to the psychoanalytic and feminist view of motherhood, passing through the “good-enough” mother or “optimal frustrator” and the anthropological tradition. In particular, motherhood as an institution for unequal power distribution received early attention in Adrienne Rich’s text *Of Woman Born* (1977), where she explains motherhood as an “institution, which aims at ensuring that … all women shall remain under male control” (13). Similarly, in Jean F. O’Barr, Deborah Pope, and Mary Wyer’s
complication *Ties That Bind: Essays on Mothering and Patriarchy* (1990) the institution of motherhood is named as an authoritative voice of patriarchal culture that shapes women’s subjectivity at home and abroad (“Introduction” 2; Chodorow and Contratto 56). Despite developments in conceptualizing motherhood, the “prevailing gender belief system” and the location of motherhood in a “societal context organized by gender” have stayed very much the same (Arendell 1193).

The concept of “family crisis” that Cristina García portrays in her novel addresses the impossibility of fulfilling the role of the “fantasy of the perfect mother” and the role of “natural” motherhood as explained by Adrienne Rich:

[First, that] a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfish; that children and mothers are the “causes” of each others’ sufferings. (22)

Rich’s definition of “natural” motherhood finds its counterpart in *Dreaming in Cuban* where discourses on the maternal as a state of bonding, identification, and dependency between mothers and daughters are additionally called into question by different political allegiances that highlight the emotional distance between family members across and within diasporic borders (De Abruna 87).

In an interview with Iraida H. López, Cristina García explains that in *Dreaming in Cuban* the positioning of three generations of women in a very close relationship with one another before and after the Cuban Revolution was used to examine “how women have responded and adapted to what happened to their families after 1959,” and explore “the emotional and political alliances that form within families” (609). By placing women at the center in Cuba’s history of political and socio-economic relations with North America, the author further questions traditional representations of family and motherhood by intertwining the private/domestic sphere with a public/political context. García also explains in this interview that by focusing on women the female characters have a voice of their own to recount their own personal (hi)stories.
of separation, alienation, and reconciliation outside the realm of male traditional history:

Traditional history, the way it has been written, interpreted and recorded, obviates women and the evolution of home, family and society, and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men. You learn where politics really lie at home. That’s what I was trying to explore on some level in *Dreaming in Cuban*. I was trying to excavate new turf, to look at the costs to individuals, families, and relationships among women of public events such as the revolution. (López 610)

Referring back to Adrienne Rich’s concept of “natural” motherhood, in Cuba, Celia del Pino is a character with a “further identity” who finds her “chief gratification” in the opportunities brought by the Revolution to women in the military since women can expand upon their previous traditional domestic role. She dedicates herself to the Revolution, volunteers to cut sugarcane for microbrigades, builds nurseries for infants, and becomes the judge in her neighborhood. When asked about Celia, Cristina García explains that she wanted to show “how much revolution and political activism galvanized her [Celia]. For her, the Revolution means something she can put her energies, her intellect and her heart into. It stimulates her blossoming, her flowering, her fulfillment; she is able to reach her potential” (Carabí 21). Paradoxically, considering that the role of the mother prevails as the most notable contribution in post-revolutionary Cuba and that women’s position is re-located as primarily a biological function, a role that “remains the same as in old, patriarchal, pre-revolutionary times” (Torrents 177), Celia is inevitably limited in reaching her “chief gratification,” a “failure” which is epitomized in the lack of familism between the del Pino women.

The characters’ commitment to different political systems is an essential component in defining their allegiance towards each other or their sense of familism. Their personal vendettas are the result of a personal and familial past of loss and abandonment, “a past infected with disillusion” (García, *Dreaming in Cuban* 117) which, in the form of political loyalties, leads to confrontation between family members, and isolation.
and alienation amongst them (Kevane 87). Celia is moved by her strong support for communism, patriotism, and loyalty to *El Líder*, and refuses to leave the island; Celia’s daughter Lourdes, driven by her pursuit of the American Dream, migrates with her daughter Pilar to New York and leaves Castro’s “island prison” behind (García, *Dreaming in Cuban* 173); Pilar criticizes her mother’s support of North American values and yearns to go back to Cuba and to Celia; Lourdes’s sister Felicia lacks commitment to the revolutionary cause, which becomes a source of great rancor between her and her mother (107); and Felicia’s twin daughters, who grow up inculcated in Castro’s Cuba, live in a boarding school away from their mother.

The lack of family ties is reinforced by the characters’ geographical distance and thus, their inability to communicate physically; the tangible boundaries that separate them across the ocean convey an emotional and spiritual disconnection from each other: “[e]ach character lives within the confines of his or her personal obsessions, unable to reach out to the others” (Kevane 87). This physical and emotional estrangement is further complicated by the rejection of an inability to fulfill the maternal fantasy and “perfectibility” of the mother by the three generations of the del Pino women (Chodorow and Contratto 55). Lourdes describes how she feels rejected from her mother:

> She imagined herself alone and shriveled in her mother’s womb, envisioned the first days in her mother’s unyielding arms. Her mother’s fingers were stiff and splayed as spoons, her milk a tasteless gray. Her mother stared at her with eyes collapsed of expectation. If it’s true that babies learn love from their mothers’ voices, then this is what Lourdes heard: “I will not remember her name.” (García, *Dreaming in Cuban* 74)

After giving birth to her “porous baby,” “with no shadow” (50), Celia is confined to a mental institution as a result of a nervous breakdown. She later tries to revive her troubled and disturbed relationship with her children Lourdes, Felicia, and Javier, who are “desolate, deaf and blind to the world, to each other, to her” (117). Yet, there is still an emotional divide with Lourdes, which Celia writes about in a letter to her lover Gustavo: “That girl [Lourdes] is a stranger to me. When I approach her, she turns numb, as if she wanted to be dead
in my presence... She still punishes me for the early years” (163).
Similarly, Lourdes, whose “views are strictly black-and-white” (26), is
continuously infuriated by her daughter Pilar’s resistance to coercion
and admits that she “has no patience for dreamers, for people who
live between black and white” (129). Pilar, however, suffers from her
mother’s arbitrariness and inconsistency (140) and openly expresses
her desires to escape to Cuba and see her grandmother Celia: “I feel
much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom, even though I
haven’t seen my grandmother in seventeen years. We don’t speak at
night anymore, but she’s left me her legacy nonetheless.... Even in
silence, she gives me the confidence to do what I believe is right, to
trust my own perceptions” (176).

The volatile mother-daughter relationships exemplified by the del
Pino women cast aside the traditional and limited perception of mother-
ing as “good” and “bad”; instead, these conflictive kinships support the
codification of “mother” as “a complex and multiple signifier” within a
Latina/Chicana discourse in which maternal woman to woman rela-
tionships are highly valued (Flores 700). Furthermore, motherhood is
redefined according to specific social, political, and generic circumstances;
and the act of mothering is contested, and potentially reformulated so
that the mother-daughter dyad and motherhood constitute “a learning
process” (Everingham 7).

Detachment and lack of familism between the del Pino women is
also metaphorically represented in Celia undergoing a mastectomy.
Her missing breast denotes a range of theories which, according to
Kathryn Schwarz in her analysis of the Amazonian body and the breast
as a point of sexual difference and escape from patriarchal structures,
involves the denunciation of sexual politics, reproductive practices, aes-
thetics, and the violence wrought upon women’s bodies by authoritative
and oppressive discourses on gender roles (147-69). Moreover, Celia’s
mastectomy disrupts the terms of the erotic, aesthetic, and maternal
conventions as does her rejection of pregnancy. The removal of the
breast itself suggests that the female body is no guarantee of a maternal
role: “Representations of the breast, and particularly of the maternal
breast, are always at least as concerned with morality as with medicine,
and the question of what obligation a mother has to nurse her child”
(152). Swcharz adds that “the breast has more power than the womb
or even the seed, excluding men from the child’s formation; whether
exposed for the sake of nursing or of fashion, the breast threatens always to signify an excess of female control” (152). In the same vein, when examining fascination with the female breast from the seventeenth to nineteenth century, Nina Prytula’s article “Great-Breasted and Fierce” highlights how the breast was primarily and ultimately associated with an idealized notion of maternity (173). These fictitious and allegorical maternal associations of the female breast as being nourishing and embracing, nurturing and protective, and unifying the mother and child are dismantled in the image of Celia. Celia’s missing breast echoes her lack of control and the rupture of family ties, which divides the family politically, emotionally, and geographically. Likewise, the analogy of Celia’s breast as a symbol of nurture goes beyond being symbolic of her dismembered family.

**TRANSNATIONAL MATERNAL (DIS)CONNECTIONS: THE ABSENCE OF COLLECTIVIST ORIENTATION AND THE PRACTICE OF NONEXCLUSIVE MOTHERING**

Many of the imaginary constructs of mothering and the ideal nuclear family are filtered through Western white middle-class ideology or “motherhood ideology” (Kaplan 121). When making a distinction between the relationship of white middle-class families and African-American to capitalist political economies, Patricia Hill Collins explains that unlike white middle-class women, for women of color, work and motherhood have never functioned as a dichotomy but as intertwining acts for supporting the family. Being both economically able to provide for the family and performing the maternal role was, and is “an integral part of motherhood” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 49; “Shifting the Center” 46). Collins further asserts that, “women of color have performed motherwork that challenges social constructions of work and family as separate spheres, of male and female gender roles as similarly dichotomized, and of the search for autonomy as the guiding human quest” (“Shifting the Center” 47). The relevance of “motherwork” lies in being a deconstructing act of heterosexist mothering models that defy the perception of Latina/Chicana women as being “the hearth of the home; [to be] chaste, modest, honorable, clean, and, most importantly, to minister to the needs for her husband and children” (Mirandé and Enríquez 98).
Within a Latina/Chicana family context, Collins’ concept of “motherwork” could be translated into what Denise A. Segura and Jennifer L. Pierce refer to when comparing Chicana/o family structure and European-American women as a “collectivist orientation” (64). They state that Chicana/o families “maintain and affirm a distinct culture characterized by familism, compadrazgo, and a sense of collectivist orientation that is devalued by the dominant culture’s emphasis on individualism” (70). Along the same lines, Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez add that, “it is not uncommon for Chicanos to pool their resources to help members of the immediate family or other relatives” (108).

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Lourdes del Pino is the character that best exemplifies the rejection of a collectivist orientation in favor for individual success. In her pursuit of the American Dream, Lourdes betrays her own people by selling out to North American interests, which is highlighted when she opens her second bakery in Brooklyn and plans to sell “tricolor cupcakes and Uncle Sam Marzipan” (136). Her commodification to the American global market and the mass production of food “also allows her to identify herself with an alternative community that is not Cuban” (Dalleo and Sáez 123): “She envisioned a chain of Yankee Doodle bakeries stretching across America to St. Louis, Dallas, Los Angeles, her apple pies and cupcakes on main streets and in suburban shopping malls everywhere. Each store would bear her name, her legacy: LOURDES PUENTE, PROPIETOR” (García, *Dreaming in Cuban* 171). Lourdes is not only complicit and a victim of her own fanatical consumerism, but she emphasizes the impoverishment of her own people who are suffering from severe food shortages as a result of the United States’ embargo on Cuba’s largest export crop, sugar: “Each glistening éclair is a grenade … each strawberry shortcake proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes’s success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba” (117). Lourdes’ thirst for power is directly conveyed in her antagonism to Celia’s Cuba and all that her mother embodies. As she foments “her own brand of anarchy closer to home” (177) by holding sessions at the bakery with Cuban extremists, Lourdes is “convinced [that] she can fight Communism from behind her bakery counter” (136) and “denounce the Communist threat to America” (171). Reflecting on her actions, Lourdes openly rejects the familial component of familism; in the face of arduous social and
economic conditions, she refuses to establish long-distance attachment and unconditional loyalty to family members (Falicov 278; García, *The Mexican Americans* 102).

While examining the mother–daughter dyad from both a psychological and a sociological perspective, Alice Adams [REF MISSING] states that “[m]ost treatments of mothering, feminist or not, emphasized that the primary task of the prototypical middle-class daughter was to separate” (414). Similarly, in her book *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American-Jewish Women* (1996), Janet Burstein stresses the confrontation of the daughter with two possible alternatives through the mirror motif: either behaving like her mother or separating from her—a choice also echoed in Adrienne Rich’s idea of “becoming individuated” (236). While daughters sought to achieve economic and professional independence and autonomy, they also found themselves drawn towards the “gendered cultural imperatives” of domesticity and parenthood in which their mothers were trapped: “They stood, as it were, between mirrors that offered incompatible images of the world and themselves” (Burstein 115).

Faced with the impossibility of penetrating a mother’s world, and in their need of “becoming individuated,” daughters are forced to seek motherly affection elsewhere by bonding with other (fe)male figures or “othermothers” as defined by Simone A. James Alexander (7)—an extension of a Latina/Chicana version of compadrazgo or “fictive kinship system” (Williams 24). In *Dreaming in Cuban*, there is the almost inexistent extent of behavioral familism, that is, “the degree of interaction between both nuclear and extended family members” (García, *The Mexican Americans* 102). In particular, Lourdes and Felicia fail to see themselves as a continuation of their mother Celia, as well as Pilar of Lourdes; thus, the relationships fail to produce a “multi-object relational configuration of daughter/mother/aunt/grandmother/godmother/father” (Segura and Pierce 77). Instead, the strained mother–daughter relationship favors closeness primarily with the figure of the grandmother, as initially is the case between Celia and Pilar, probably because “the grandmother/granddaughter relationship is less tense than that of mothers and daughters” (77).

As Pilar separates from her mother Lourdes, she temporarily finds security, self-affirmation, and guidance in her grandmother Celia. The telepathic connection between Celia and Pilar is illustrative of
“psychological familism,” the existence of an “intergenerational bond between country and family” (Falicov 279). Pilar’s memories are kept alive through the image of her grandmother, the representative of her Hispanic past left behind on the island. However, after Pilar visits Cuba and realizes that she belongs to New York more than Cuba, she also recognizes that she cannot be her grandmother’s guardian of Cuban history or her granddaughter: “Everyday Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me” (García, Dreaming in Cuban 138). As with the other female characters in the novel, Pilar and Celia’s connection and gradual separation is further epitomized through the loss of language: while Celia criticizes that Pilar’s Spanish “is no longer hers” (7), Pilar uses painting to “find a unique language, obliterating the clichés” (139); Lourdes speaks another idiom entirely, a language which is lost to the other Cubans in Cuba (221); Felicia utters empty words that keep her daughters “prisoners in her alphabet world” (121); and Felicia’s daughters speak a coded language that Felicia cannot penetrate (120). The female characters’ impossibility of rapport due to the loss of language opens instead alternative communication path liaisons between daughter/father and mother/son: Lourdes maintains conversations with her father’s spirit and fantasizes about the son she miscarried in Cuba, whom she replaces at the end of the novel by taking Felicia’s son Ivanito to New York with her; Felicia tries to contact his father through the ritual practices of santería and, for a while, finds comfort in her son in a world of poetry and coconut ice cream; and Luz and Milagros, fraught with mixed feelings of anger, resentment, and maternal need reconcile with their father as an act of contempt and defiance towards Felicia. They find in their father a “language more eloquent than the cheap bead necklaces of words their mother offers” (124). The stereotypical familial associations challenged by the father/daughter and mother/son connection in the novel sustain the paternalist scheme within the family system by which mothers are more likely to pamper and indulge their sons than their daughters (Mirandé and Enríquez 114); such transposition of dyads in childhood not only establishes the irreparable bonds between mothers and daughters that will pervade into adulthood, but it also questions the persevering view advocated by Latinas/Chicanas that “la familia is the basic source of emotional and physical support for the individual” (114).
CONCLUSION: SHAPING NEW MEANINGS OF LATINA/CHICANA MOTHERHOOD

That the concept of motherhood is “the most profound life transit a woman undertakes, the deepest knowledge she can experience” is arguable in that such an ideological approach responds to a set of social, political, and cultural rules dictated by men for the benefit of men (O’Barr, Pope and Wyer 1): “Motherhood as an institution has been named by the authoritative voice not of women but of patriarchal culture” (2). Nevertheless, the concept of motherhood as the mechanism that defines women solely as reproducers and biological subjects of the nation still persists in Western and Eastern conservative societies today. The analysis of Cuban American writer Cristina García’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban* demonstrates that myths on the fantasy of the perfect mother are not reduced to men’s performativity, but that women themselves struggle to come to terms with their understanding of the maternal role, and thus, they might aid in their own subordination. Furthermore, Cristina García defies the “almost invariably stress” that Latina/Chicana narratives put on familism as a way of inclusiveness and interdependence between family members (Falicov 278). The fact that the del Pino women fail to overcome each others’ political and personal agendas culminates in an absence of a sense of family coherence (Falicov 278) and a lack of family connectedness, that is, “the obligation to care for and support one another” (Mirandé and Enríquez 278). In an attempt to sustain cultural continuity and recreate cultural spaces, the characters move across “a psychologically complex experience of presence and absence” as in Pilar’s psychological and physical connection with Cuba or Lourdes’ physical and emotional disconnection with her mother/land (Falicov 276).

*Dreaming in Cuban* examines motherhood and mothering in terms of gendered and national formulations on female subjectivity. The novel not only responds to the feminist theories of “family crisis,” but it also defies Latina/Chicana family concepts such as familism, *compadrazgo*, collectivist orientation, and nonexclusive mothering. The division of the del Pino family members and the impossibility of mothering are not unique to a specific nuclear family or given society; instead, it represents a cross-cultural phenomenon. These transnational geographies, however, can serve as physical and emotional spaces to collectively challenge traditional constructions of femininity towards new spaces.

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that negotiate women’s identities as mothers, and discourses on motherhood. On the one hand, *Dreaming in Cuban* confronts a prescriptive and normative Westernized comprehension of the nuclear family and motherhood as monolithic constructs. On the other hand, the novel displaces family components characteristic of Latina/Chicana family. These challenges are evident of the need for a new revaluation on sentimentalized notions of motherhood and family according to “unique constellations” that define specific and alternative family values and patterns, in particular on the roles of the maternal, and the meanings of mothering and motherhood.

1 The idea of the nuclear family as “natural, normal and ideal” encompassed patterns of structured inequality in terms of power imbalance and class, race and gender-based inequalities (Jagger and Wright 2). Conservative constructs on the idea of family perceived this, above all, as an adoptive unit that mediates between the individual and society to provide the individual with personal growth and development, and for physical and emotional integrity. For a detailed analysis on modern sociological theories of family life and the diverse realities of contemporary family values, see Jagger and Wright.

2 The three perspectives on mothering from the social psychology tradition, the “good-enough” mother and the anthropological tradition identify the needs of the child as natural, as given by biology. Whilst the first one places emphasis on the child as the shaper of the mother’s behavior and the third one focuses on the diversity in which different cultures meet the child’s needs, the “good-enough mother” learns to identify the child’s needs and offers a nearly perfect care-giving environment. The psychoanalytic and feminist view of motherhood, however, is based on an act of mutual recognition by the mother and child and acknowledgment of autonomy and independence from each other (Everingham 11-12).

3 Celia’s commitment to the revolutionary cause brings to mind the figure of the female combatant, common icon of Cuban nationalism. As Stoner asserts: “[n]o other symbol so permeates Cuban nationalist lore than that of the stalwart and feminine combatant, willing to sacrifice her home, family, and wealth for her nation and its patriarchal leaders” (72).
Rothman refers to the concept of “seed” to make the distinction between a patriarchal and “matrilineal” system. The seed is essential to draw on theories of blood ties, understood as a genetic connection that controls women as mothers, daughters and also sons, who grow out of man’s seed.

WORKS CITED

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