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"I am no longer the child my mother shipped": The Achievement of Erotic Sovereignty in Angie Cruz's *Dominicana*

Set in the 1960s amid the civil rights movement and the emerging second wave of feminism, Angie Cruz's *Dominicana* recounts the expedited coming-of-age story of fifteen-year-old Ana Canción as a forced migration subject from the Dominican Republic to Washington Heights, New York City. In this bildungsroman tale, the child bride protagonist confronts questions of migration, motherhood, friendship, and female sexuality all while in an abusive marriage with Juan Ruiz, a Dominican man seventeen years her senior. From the onset of *Dominicana*, Ana's body is a site of body politics or a "battleground." That is, Ana's body is used to achieve her family's financial security; by moving to New York and having Juan Ruiz's child, Ana's mother hopes to have Juan's consistent financial support.

Hours after the pair obtain a marriage certificate in the Dominican Republic, Ana is uprooted from her home and transplanted to Washington Heights. Given Juan's repeated orders to neither leave their apartment nor open the door for anyone, Ana's diasporic experience is chiefly bound to the domestic space and is circumscribed by gendered power dynamics that leave her with few choices as to the direction that her

life will take. Despite initial dreams to earn her GED, open her own business, and manage a house full of friends and family, Ana notes that Juan's control prevents her from "having [her] own friends, [her] own life" (115) and only aggravates her feelings of loneliness and homesickness.

Through the novel's incorporation of both heterosexual and homosocial relationships between the protagonist and secondary characters, Cruz identifies the complexities of female sexuality and the intersections between gender, power, and sex. Although Cruz's earlier novels such as *Soledad* (2001) and *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005) have garnered significant scholarly attention within the interdisciplinary field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, feminist scholars have yet to evaluate her 2019 novel *Dominicana*. In this article, therefore, I offer an intersectional feminist reading of *Dominicana* while analyzing the presence of the erotic in the work and highlighting the ways in which the protagonist uses the erotic to challenge machista ideals and develop her own sense of a body sovereignty. I will pay particular attention to Ana's intimate relationships with César, Juan's brother, and Marisela, Ana's only female friend in New York, and demonstrate the ways in which these two characters help Ana liberate herself from the abusive control of both her husband and her mother.

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The works of Chela Sandoval and Carolyn Ureña, among others, provide a conducive theoretical framework for this article. Their call for "decolonial love" and their acknowledgement of a "third meaning of love" allows for colonial subjects like Cruz's protagonist to heal from the wounds of coloniality and unleash the transformative power of love. This article also incorporates Audre Lorde's generative work on the erotic to demonstrate the ways in which Ana uses the erotic both as a social practice and as a technique of the self. Ana's use of the erotic extends beyond the patriarchal constraints of U.S. and Dominican cultures and institutions and not only allows her to forge a new identity within this framework, but additionally results in the reclamation of her own trafficked body.

"Your parents were the ones who called me so I could take you away": Coming of Age as a Trafficked Child in New York

Prior to an analysis of Ana's relationships with Marisela and César, it is worth outlining Ana's trajectory as a child bride and her own parents' role in her trafficking. As Guillermina De Ferrari has previously argued, Caribbean girlhood stories frequently offer a window into colonial and patriarchal structures given their repeated schemes of subjection and domesticity (107), which is clearly shown through Cruz's protagonist

and her interactions with the novel's secondary characters. From a very young age, Ana's mother begins to prepare her daughter for her eventual marriage to Juan Ruiz, a man who presents himself as an up-and-coming businessman, splitting his time between the Dominican Republic and the United States. Prior to the protagonist's forced migration to the United States, Ana's mother ultimately reveals the importance of her daughter's marriage to Juan for the good of the family. She notes, "[Juan's brother] wants to build on our property, and with this marriage we're now bound. This is important for us – your father especially because soon all our fruit trees will be barren. The cherries are already rotten, the mangos mealy" (25). Given that the marriage is presented as a duty to her own family, specifically to her father, Ana understands that her marrying Juan is inevitable and that she has no say in the matter. As the narrator herself notes, "I know then that one day the earth will rip open underneath my feet and Juan will take me away. Tears rise. I don't know how or when, but a ravenous world waits outside for me" (5). Even as a young girl, Ana recognizes the gendered and class-based dynamics of power operating between the Canción and Ruiz families.

Ana's young age and her concomitant inability to consent to marriage or sex is made apparent in the book's opening line. Cruz writes, "The first time Juan Ruiz

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proposes, I'm eleven years old, skinny and flat-chested" (3). The protagonist's exploitation as a child is further underscored by Cruz's juxtaposition of Juan, who "pushes [the child] against the wooden fence and "insists" that she say yes to his proposal (4). This first proposal initiates a series of efforts by Ana's own mother, who makes the attempt to secure a marriage between her daughter and Juan "her top priority" (7) because of Juan's supposed wealth and connections. As narrator, the eleven-year-old Ana reflects,

> It doesn't matter if Juan's intentions are serious or not. Mamá has lived long enough to learn a man doesn't know what he thinks until a woman makes him think it. So right when I get my period at twelve and eight months, she undoes my pigtails and pulls my hair back tight so no kinks escape, so my eyes pull at the ends. When he visits, she makes me wear my Sunday dress I had outgrown a while before. It pushes the little fat I have up and around my chest for all to see. Juan's often too drunk to know the difference between a dress and a potato sack, but she colors my lips pink. (11-12)

Following Ana's first menstruation, her mother plays an important role in preparing Ana for marriage. That is, Ana's mother goes as far as to alter her daughter's

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appearance by changing her hairstyle and dress so that the child appears to be a mature woman. From this moment forward, it is clear that Ana no longer has any corporeal sovereignty and that her mother is in control of her child's body.

In addition to altering her appearance after Ana's first menstruation, her mother also makes her routinely write letters to Juan while he is away in New York. Ana notes,

> When Juan doesn't visit for a long while, Mamá makes me write him letters. Tell him how hot it's been. Unbearable. How you long to see the snow. How handsome he looks in a suit and that your favorite color is green to remind him about your eyes. They're unusual. Maybe it'll inspire him to bring you a gift. Tell him how well you're doing in school. How you love numbers so much, you dream of them while you sleep . . . Tell him how much you enjoy to cook. Be specific. Don't just say food, say pescado con coco, so he knows you're the kind of woman who's not afraid to debone a fish or grate coconut . . . Invite him to visit during the day so you can cook him a proper meal at a proper time. Say how much you would enjoy feeding him and would like to see him again. But that's not true, I say. Oh, who cares what's true. (16)

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Ana's mother unleashes several commands onto her daughter ("tell him," "invite him") that highlight the child's lack of agency. Moreover, this passage stresses Ana's innocence as she notes that some of the letters contain lies, such as the proclaimed desire to cook for Juan and to see him again. Ana's powerlessness as a child evokes Aurora Levins Morales important essay, "The Politics of Childhood," where she argues that childhood is a political condition. Levins Morales writes, "The disempowerment we all experienced as children has little outlet. We are taught to obey until our own turn comes, with few opportunities to politicize the experience and critique it. Instead we are trained to wait it out, knowing that when we are older, we will acquire privileges" (104-105). Ana believes that a vast number of privileges await her in New York, such as advanced schooling and frequent trips to department stores, and therefore endures her mother's demands.

When Ana and Juan inevitably wed a couple years later, Ana undergoes a transformation unlike any other: she technically becomes older. Upon receiving her papers that enable her to travel to New York, Ana notes, "The woman in the photograph is an older version of me: Ana Ruiz-Canción born 25 December 1946. I'm now nineteen years old" (42). The narrator later reflects, "I'm all alone with Juan. And

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now I belong to him. In less than an hour, I've lost four years of my life. Ana Canción was fifteen. Ana Ruiz is nineteen. I clamp my legs together, ankles crossed, hands woven shut" (43). Ana observes this dramatic change in her identity, and what she has lost, rather than gained, by becoming Juan's wife.

While Ana Canción may appear older on paper, her young age is made apparent to Juan when the pair spend their first night together. Juan insists that Ana undress herself and drink champagne to "help [her] relax" (45). The narrator notes, "I see him see me, my naked body reflected on the window. He steps back for a better look. What's so funny? I say. Everything about you is so new. He sticks his hands under my armpits. So new. So soft" (46). Juan's use of the word "new" only underscores the fact that Ana is a prostituted child who is about to be raped by a man seventeen years her senior. Throughout their time as a married couple in New York, Juan repeatedly rapes the child bride. Ana declares that Juan will usually return home from work intoxicated and demand sex. In an effort to avoid physical and verbal violence, Ana states that she will "close [her] eyes and just let him stick it in" (64). Nonetheless, Juan frequently assaults his wife. After one particularly violent attack at the hands of Juan, Ana hears her mother's voice saying: **"**Stay calm, a real woman knows how to manage a man, Mamá

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said" (95). Ana tentatively plans to leave Juan and return home to the Dominican Republic, but she knows that in doing so, she will trade Juan's abuse for her own mother's. Throughout the course of the novel, Ana endures domestic violence and feels torn between her duty to her family and her own freedom; these feelings are only intensified once Ana finds out that she is pregnant, news that her mother refers to as "gold in the bank" (139). It is against this backdrop that Ana forms intimate connections to Marisela and César, who ultimately uplift the protagonist and advocate for her corporeal and erotic sovereignty.

"It's impossible for me not to love her": Ana and Marisela's Erotic Friendship

Almost never venturing outside of the domestic realm or interacting with anyone other than Juan's inner-circle, Ana struggles with her own identity development as she is sprung into adulthood and wifehood all while being a recently arrived immigrant. It is not until Ana meets Marisela, another Dominican immigrant living in Washington Heights, when she makes her first friend in the United States. After borrowing one-hundred dollars from Juan, Marisela must pay him back twenty-five dollars every week for six weeks, which Juan refers to as "the easiest money [he'll] ever make" (112). During Marisela's weekly visits to pay off her loan, Ana and Marisela quickly establish

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an intimate relationship with one another. Existing solely within the space of Ana's apartment, Ana and Marisela's friendship provides the protagonist with the opportunity to reimagine her own identity outside of her family and her husband. While Ana's mobility is continually blocked by Juan, when with Marisela in her kitchen, Ana moves freely and has the power to exercise control. In fact, their friendship inspires intellectual and spiritual liberation and challenges the machista ideals that exist in their own families and in the extended Dominican-American community of Washington Heights.

Ana and Marisela's relationship provokes an empowering and erotic framework to create new social possibilities, as described by Lorde: "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama" (91). Through the pair's embrace of the erotic, both women can recognize their own self-actualization and defy their husbands' abusive power and control. In this portion of the article, I explore the ways in which Ana and Marisela's friendship encapsulates an erotic awareness that influences the characters' transformations. In *Dominicana*, Angie Cruz highlights the power of female friendship and links Ana's reclamation of erotic

power to the protagonist's eventual reclamation of her body and her sexuality, thereby demonstrating the ways in which the erotic is conceived as a resource for social agency among Latinx women in the 1960s.

Marisela's character first appears in the third part of *Dominicana*. With Ana as the narrator, Cruz's readers are presented with a description of Marisela that is heavily focused on her physical appearance and dress. Prior to opening the door for Marisela, Ana observes, "Through the peephole I watch Marisela in the hallway looking at herself in a compact mirror. A perfect face: cat eyes, a pointy nose, pink-lined lips. Her straight hair is well behaved, ends flipped in a big curl. When I open the door I get the full layout: coat, bag, and boots all the color of emeralds. Standing a head taller than me, she's an ad for the happiest woman alive" (115). Ana is immediately drawn to Marisela and is quick to compare her own diasporic experience with that of Marisela's, who Ana reasons to believe leads a completely happy and glamorous lifestyle. During their first meeting, Ana has an intense desire to impress Marisela and feels a deep sense of self-consciousness and shame when she realizes that her "apartment looks plain with [Marisela] in it" (115).

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Upon entering Ana's apartment, Marisela compliments the smell of the young bride's cooking, which provokes Ana to invite Marisela to join her for lunch. Ana comments, "Marisela is my first female guest since my arrival to New York. So I set the table for two, using the nicer plates. Even her velvety voice belongs on a radio. I hum while I heat the corn oil to fry the last plátano in the fridge. Thank Santa Altagracia for my great judgement to have made pigeon peas with rice and stewed shredded beef today. I don't always make a full meal" (115-116). Enchanted by Marisela's "velvety voice," Ana uses the few remaining resources she has in her kitchen to prepare a thoughtful meal for her newfound friend, even if it means that she will have to forgo a meal in order to make sure that there is enough food for Juan when he returns home from work. This selfless act is born out of Ana's unexpressed desire to establish an intimate connection with another woman, or as Lorde puts it, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (87). As this female friendship burgeons at the halfway point of the novel, readers notice a drastic change in the tone of Ana's narration. Prior to her first encounter with Marisela, Ana's only interactions occur between Juan and his brothers, and she is profoundly depressed and longing for her

own family, especially her sister. However, Marisela's female presence offers Ana a certain level of hope that Juan and his male family members are unable to provide and allows Ana to reproduce a female bond that was lost upon her move to the United States.

At the conclusion of their first brief meeting, Ana and Marisela immediately forge an erotic connection. As Marisela says goodbye to Ana and embraces her for a hug, the narrator pleads, "Don't go! I want to say as we hug and my nose skims the length of her neck. Her floral perfume stays on me" (119). In previous erotic scenes in *Dominicana*, Juan uses Ana's body for his own pleasure and the protagonist is therefore hindered from exploring her own female sexuality. This particular moment with Marisela, however, represents a profound contrast between Ana's intimate interactions with her husband; here, Ana is in control of moderating the physical affection she offers to her new friend, in the form of skimming her nose across Marisela's neck.

Furthermore, this scene demonstrates the possibilities of alternative relationships that have historically been erased due to compulsory heterosexuality, as theorized by feminist thinker Adrienne Rich. As summarized by Jamie Heckert, Rich's "anti-authoritarian method" exposes the ways in which compulsive heterosexuality aims to

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control women's emotional and erotic energies in an effort to maintain the capitalist cisheteropatriarchy (257). According to Rich, the reign of compulsory heterosexuality forces the lesbian experience to be rendered as invisible despite the passionate connections or "survival relationships" that innumerous women have established in both real and fictional realms (652). In Rich's own words, "Sex is thus equated with attention from the male, who is charismatic though brutal, infantile, or unreliable. Yet it is the women who make life endurable for each other, given physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other" (656). In this abbreviated intimate interaction between the two female characters of *Dominicana*, Ana and Marisela exchange a moment of physical tenderness that is free of the pain or discomfort that Ana typically associates with the intimate interactions between her and her husband. Ana and Marisela embody Rich's notions of the lesbian continuum, which consists of a "primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (648-649).

While Ana and Marisela give each other affection and touch one another during each of their meetings, their erotic connection extends beyond the physical. The pair

openly share details about their personal lives, sometimes exchanging secret information amongst each other before they decide to inform their husbands. In fact, shortly after finding out that she is pregnant, Ana yearns to tell Marisela the news given that she is "the only person [Ana] can call a friend" (133). Ana notes, "Because I want to tell her everything, the next time Marisela comes over, I blurt out, as soon as I open the door, I'm pregnant" (123). Although Ana is eager to tell Marisela the news, the protagonist is hesitant to tell her husband and entrusts her friend to keep the information amongst themselves. In a dialogue between the two, Cruz writes, "Marisela? Can I ask you a favor? Yes, anything. We're comrades. Don't tell Juan about the baby. I want to surprise him. Ay sister, dear sister. Your secret is safe with me" (124). Ana and Marisela's own erotic female space offers the two women a sense of security and protection from patriarchal oppressors, or in this case, Ana's husband, Juan. The pair's erotic connection allows for intimate and honest communication, or as Lorde insinuates, "To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a Kleenex" (90). Expected to hide her emotions from both Juan and her family back home in the Dominican Republic, Ana's friendship with

Marisela enables the young protagonist to freely explore and express her feelings in a safe female space.

In addition to sharing secrets with one another, the pair also exchange valuable knowledge and resources to help support themselves as mothers, wives, and immigrants. For instance, upon discovering that Juan strictly monitors Ana's purchases, so much so that she must use cooking oil as hand cream, Marisela begins to gift Ana with cosmetic supplies such as lipsticks and nail polishes. Additionally, Marisela gives Ana practical information about free English classes being offered "at the rectory, right down on the 165th Street, next to the church's entrance" (116). Marisela's specific details about the free language classes allow Ana to not only develop her English language skills, but also provide the protagonist with the opportunity to leave Juan's apartment and explore the surrounding neighborhood on her own terms. This specific instance is an example of shared erotic knowledge, which Lorde argues "becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives" (90). By sharing information about the church's English classes, Marisela encourages Ana "not to settle

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for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe" and inspires the protagonist to defy her husband's demands (90).

Moreover, Marisela later provides Ana with opportunities to earn her own money, which proves to be an essential step in her preparations to leave Juan and send for her family. In one instance, Marisela contracts Ana to craft over two-hundred souvenirs for an acquaintance's wedding. Upon Marisela's arrival to retrieve the souvenirs from Ana's apartment, Ana observes, "When Marisela arrives she is still plain-faced, no makeup, as if we're not just friends but close friends, like sisters who see each other for what we are" (136). Ana then refers to Marisela as "beautiful," which suggests that Ana is to some extent attracted to her friend (137). Ana's attraction to Marisela evokes Rich's notion of the lesbian continuum: "While women may, indeed must, be one another's allies, mentors, and comforters in the female struggle for survival, there is quite extraneous delight in each other's company and attraction to each other's minds and character, which proceeds from a recognition of each other's strengths" (658-659). Ana's recurring commentary on Marisela's appearance implies that their relationship extends beyond the platonic; as Ana notes, her and Marisela are

"not just friends" (137). Clearly, Ana and Marisela's friendship is rooted in the erotic that Lorde and Rich conceptualize in their respective works.

Following an exchange of pleasantries, Marisela hands Ana a payment of ten dollars in exchange for her work and asks the protagonist, "Doesn't it feel good to make your own money, Ana?" (137). Marisela aims to show Ana that earning one's own money not only incites a pleasurable feeling, but is also a way of performing self-love, which Jennifer C. Nash defines as "a practice of self-valuation" (3). Given that Ana has put her family's needs above her own for her entire life, Ana initially struggles to embrace a practice of self-love and is uncomfortable with the idea of keeping the money for herself. The protagonist professes, "Well, it's good to be able to help my family back home. They always need. Do I have to tell Juan about the money? I say to change the subject" (138). In response to Ana's inquiry, Marisela simply states, "What you do with [the money] is your business" (138). Through her succinct answer, Marisela advocates for the radical practice of self-love and challenges patriarchal expectations that have been ingrained into Ana's way of thinking by both her parents and her husband. As Nash notes, "Love is a labor of actively reorienting the self, pushing the self to be configured in new ways that might be challenging or difficult" (11). Ana's original

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discomfort with Marisela's advice emphasizes Nash's argument that self-love is not instantaneous, but rather dependent upon a woman's active dedication to subverting the conditions of the patriarchy.

Upon the conclusion of the aforementioned chapter of *Dominicana*, Ana reflects upon her relationship with Marisela and begins to compare her friend to a mother-like figure. The emotional distance between Ana and her biological mother is as large as the spatial one, and even after the mother moves to New York to help Ana raise her newborn daughter, she refuses to acknowledge the sacrifices undertaken by Ana as an immigrant married to an abusive, unfaithful husband who constrains her freedom to engage in the new community she inhabits. In an effort to fill the void that Ana's own mother cannot offer her, Ana begins to lean on Marisela as a female mentor and confidant. In the following striking passage Ana notes:

> [Marisela] is doing more than anyone else has ever done for me, even when my house is plain, even when to her I must look like some naïve child. She's here, eating with me. Being with me. Helping me make money. It's impossible for me not to love her. Marisela leans over and grabs both of my hands the same way the nurse at the hospital did. I don't know where to look, so I look at my nails,

> short from biting them. You're so generous and good in the heart, Ana. My eyes water. Not even my mother ever says such kind things. I realize then that one day, I'll be Marisela's age and my daughter will be the age I am now. What fortune to have Marisela in my life, in my kitchen, filling the emptiness in my heart and in the apartment. My tongue is tied and I fear sounding idiotic. Instead I do something I've never done before, even with my own mother. I kneel on the cold linoleum floor, dig my head into Marisela's lap, and embrace her. For the first time, in a long time, I've found a true friend. (138)

Ana expresses sincere gratitude for Marisela and suggests that her friend's presence creates a sense of joy for the protagonist, even if their weekly meetings only consist of "eating with [Ana]. Being with [Ana]" (138). Ana's appreciation for Marisela clearly evokes Lorde's notion of an "erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (89). Regardless of what Ana and Marisela do together, their friendship reminds Ana that satisfaction is possible. In addition to advocating for Ana's self-love, I would also argue that Marisela's motherly love recalls Carolyn Ureña's idea of "decolonial mothering" or "new ways of loving" (99). As Ureña argues, "To love decolonially is to heal the wound that rejects the other

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within, to acknowledge the 'third meaning' of love that embraces the ambiguity and unknowability of the other, and to unleash the transformative power of that love" (99). Ana and Marisela find a way to love and care for one another amidst oppressions occurring both at public and private levels. Working within the confines of Ana's kitchen, the pair work together to subvert the racist and patriarchal structures of 1960s New York that seek to control them.

"I want to be naked with him, to love him": Ana's Open Exploration of the Erotic

Upon meeting César, Juan's younger brother, for the first time, Ana immediately identifies stark differences between the two men. When the newlyweds arrive at the New York airport on a snowy evening, César warmly greets Ana. The narrator observes that "[César] covers my head with a large knitted hat, then grabs my bags from my hand. Juan pinches me under my arm" (52). Here, Cruz juxtaposes César's tender act of care with Juan's physical abuse. As the Ruiz brothers and Ana climb up the stairs to their New York City apartment, it is revealed that César will also be living with the married couple. Ana notes, "You're gonna live with us too? I try to hide my relief that I won't be living alone with Juan" (55). From the onset of Ana's arrival to New York as a child bride, Cruz clearly demonstrates how unsafe the protagonist feels with her

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husband and the reassuring level of comfort that César brings into the tiny New York City apartment.

With the United States occupation of the Dominican Republic in the mid-1960s, Juan must return to the island to settle some affairs related to his properties there. Juan informs his pregnant wife that César will "watch over [her]" while he is away, to which Ana responds, "Whatever needs to be done, I say with the sigh of a bad actress. Inside, I'm screaming. Yes! César! I can start the English classes, and go on long walks, and César will take me dancing" (165). Not only is Ana grateful for a break from her husband's abusive reigns, but she is also elated that his absence will allow her to spend more time with César. It is during Juan's month-long trip to the Dominican Republic that César and Ana begin a romantic relationship and make plans to run away to Boston together.

In her relationship with Juan, Ana does not experience sexual gratification. In fact, the protagonist recounts only one instance in which she experiences an "unexpected sense of satisfaction" with her husband (90). Yet, with César, Ana has the freedom to express and explore her sexuality. Through an analysis of scenes where Ana freely explores the erotic with César, this section of the article highlights the importance

of Ana's sexuality within her coming-of-age narrative. By learning to appreciate her sexual identity in her romantic relationship with César, Ana gradually gains her voice through understanding herself and her body.

Upon Juan's departure to the Dominican Republic, the atmosphere in the Washington Heights apartment quickly undergoes a transformation. Ana no longer tiptoes around the unit, and she can explore the city as she pleases. Additionally, Ana begins her own cooking business selling food to César's co-workers, at the encouragement of her brother-in-law. Ana has great success with her business, and César helps her carry her dishes to the worksite, along with contributing some of his own money to purchase the cooking supplies. After a long day of selling food, César encourages Ana to come sit next to him on the couch and he later offers to give her a foot massage. The narrator reports, "He pulls on my toes gently and massages my calf around my knee. His touch is firm. His fingertips glide up and down my legs. Goose bumps emerge as if there's a cool breeze in the room. I hold my breath. The baby presses against my lower belly. Dampness between my legs. So nice to be touched" (205). It is at this moment that Ana recognizes her attraction to César, yet she attempts

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to "halt the throb between [her] legs," knowing the taboo nature of their intimate connection.

Given that César is darker skinned than his brothers, he is often subjected to discrimination and violence that his brothers are not. When César defends himself against a white businessman who engages in hate speech, César is arrested by police moments later. He spends several nights in jail and finally returns home to the apartment after five days. César approaches the seven-months pregnant Ana and reaches for her belly, declaring that he has missed the "little shrimp" (248). At this moment, Ana and César notice that the baby is kicking. Cruz writes,

> He continues to rub my belly, his hands firm and soft, skimming the bottom of my breasts. All my little hairs lift. I revel in the way his hands hold me like a gift. The rush of blood, anticipating, anticipating. I want to bite into a peach. Beg his hands, his lips to misstep and fall into my mounting desire. There you go, he says to the belly. Where the baby pushes, he kisses, his lips lingering longer and longer. My breasts tingle. I missed you, baby, he says. The baby kicks, and César rolls onto his back on the floor into a fetal position. She knocked me out! he says.

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With César on the floor, Ana tosses him a pillow and he shortly thereafter falls asleep. Cruz continues, "His soft purr turns into a deep snore. I sit and watch him. To dull the ache, I place a pillow between my legs, rock back and forth, until the earthquake between my legs strikes. Cabronita! I hear my sister snicker" (248). In this scene, not only is Ana able to recognize her own sexual desires, but she also responds to them through masturbation. This marks a major transformation for the protagonist, given that she previously viewed female pleasure as shameful and unnatural.

Three days before Juan's return, César and Ana go dancing at the Audubon, a club in Washington Heights. Alongside many other Dominicans, Ana and César happily dance merengue. As the pair dance, the protagonist cannot help but notice that the Ana at the Audubon is not who Juan left one month earlier: "This Ana, so light, so loved, so beautiful" (262). As the night draws to a close, Ana and César kiss one another for the first time. Cruz writes,

> César looks at me with love. I turn myself away so my backside leans against him. His sex, a pistol. I move away. He pulls me closer. I close my eyes. I want to be naked with him, to love him, to feel his hands between my legs, on my breasts. He rubs against me. The crowd thickens with people dancing. The music

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> swallows us in, embraces us. He holds on to me. When we dance, he stays close, closer than ever before. My insides swell and I kiss him. Suck on his tongue, bite his lips, and I am lost to him. (263)

With César, Ana can visualize her own wants and desires. As the couple leave the club and walk back home to their apartment, César confesses his love to Ana, to which she instantaneously replies, "Juan will kill you" (264). Ana knows the violence Juan is capable of, yet she agrees with César that "there's no point in lying" about their love for one another (264). Here, the pair enact what Chela Sandoval refers to as a decolonial love. As Sandoval writes, "This form of love is not the narrative of love as encoded in the West: it is another kind of love, a synchronic process that punctures through traditional, older narratives of love, that ruptures everyday being" (142). Through Ana and César's decolonial love, the protagonist is able to break free from the abusive reigns of her husband and her mother. Cruz later depicts an erotic scene between Ana and César:

> César and I go into the bedroom. We don't turn on any other lights or say another thing. In the dark with the moon as our witness, I pull off his suit jacket, unbutton his shirt. Touch his clavicle. Undo his belt, his pants, and watch them

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> fall on the floor. I pull down his white underwear, bleached by me. His pistol springs up and points at me and for the first time I don't cringe or look away. I stare at it. Grab it. I want it inside of me. I turn around for him to unzip my dress. To undo my bra. My underwear. All off. All on the floor. When we face each other, naked like newborns, he grabs my belly, round and hard. He traces the dark thin line that runs from my belly button to my nest. His fingers tangle in my pubic hair. You're so fucking beautiful, he says, and I press his hand and push his fingers inside of me. He gasps into my ear, his curls tickling my face. My nipples harden. He turns me around so that his sex rubs between my legs. He folds me over onto the bed. His chest close to my back. His lips on my neck, on my shoulders. His hands dig into me. I grab him and push him inside me. I don't care if I die right there. I want him to thrust inside of me forever. Let this be our last day. Let us die right here. (264-265)

Unlike in previous sexual encounters with Juan, here Ana is not ashamed about sex; she is present with César and does not dissociate. Moreover, Cruz's use of active verbs in this particular scene, such as, "I grab him and push him inside me," demonstrates that Ana is in control.

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Despite their profound love for each other, the couple agree that it is best to wait for the baby to be born before they escape to Boston, for Ana's own safety. Nevertheless, their plans are thwarted when Juan returns home and informs Ana that he has sent for her mother and her younger brother, and they will arrive in a few short days. Once again, Ana must choose between family and freedom. Although Ana must stay with Juan for a while longer, she is able to stand up for herself in ways that would have been inconceivable prior to establishing connections to César and Marisela. On his first night back in New York, Juan wants to have sex, but Ana declares that she is tired. The narrator reflects,

> I close my eyes to make Juan disappear. I turn my back to him again. Can't he see I don't want to be touched? Can't he see I'm no longer his? His sex pokes me from behind. He lifts my skirt. He grabs my hair in his fist as if it's the reins of a horse and jerks my head back so I look at him. I pray to the statue of Jesus sitting on the windowsill, next to the candle of the Virgin Altagracia, and St. Martin. And I imagine myself swelling up into a ball like a pufferfish. Impossible to bite into. Get out! Get off me! I scream, and kick Juan. I stumble out of the bed. My body trembles. Juan's sex points to the ceiling. He looks at me befuddled like a

> stranger. I stand there. Feet planted. I pull the sheet off the bed and over me. Good to be home, he says sarcastically. He doesn't yell back. He doesn't insist. (281)

Ana's courage to defend herself against Juan's sexual abuse is a result of her newfound achievement of erotic sovereignty. Juan is left "befuddled" by Ana's transformation and does not pursue her any longer. Although Ana does not leave Juan for Cesár, her communication with her husband breaks with his patriarchal expectations of marriage and is therefore an act of rebellion against both Juan and her family in the Dominican Republic.

Over the course of *Dominicana*, Ana's reflections about Marisela and César demonstrate the significance of their respective friendship and romantic relationship in her own character development. Only days after their daughter, Altagracia, is born, Juan assaults Ana. She is rushed to the emergency room after her stiches rip, causing her to lose a significant amount of blood. It is only after this horrific event that Ana's mother finally recognizes the sacrifices that her daughter has made for her family; consequently, Ana and Juan separate, and Ana raises Altagracia with the help and support of her mother.

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Ana's relationships with Marisela and César enable the protagonist to achieve a sense of body sovereignty through the erotic. Ana's use of the erotic extends beyond the patriarchal constraints of U.S. and Dominican cultures and institutions and not only allows her to forge a new identity within this framework, but additionally results in the reclamation of her own trafficked body. In her third novel, *Dominicana*, Angie Cruz honors the erotic while capturing the challenges that come with healing past wounds and entering a place of self-love and self-actualization.

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