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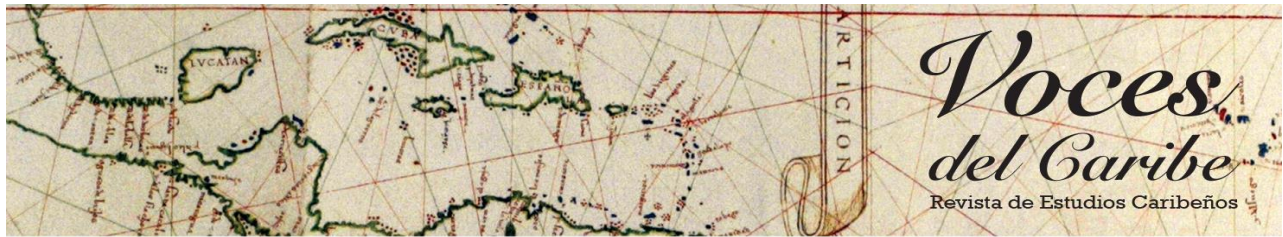
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Meta-ideologizing the *Pater*: ¿*Quién diablos es Juliette?* and a Coalitional Consciousness

Literary theorist Chela Sandoval's groundbreaking work, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, provides a very useful framework for introducing and analyzing the power relations depicted in the complex Cuban film, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* (1997), by Mexican director Carlos Marcovich. Sandoval describes modernist notions of power as a predominantly vertical relationship that is characterized by "a patronly or matronly compassion . . . in relation to those less privileged" (74). When reflecting on Cuba's literary landscape in these terms, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's antislavery novel *Sab* immediately comes to mind. Avellaneda's narrative exhibits modernist notions of power through its critique of discrete and identifiable oppressors, while Marcovich's cinematic narrative exudes the postmodern through a messy, yet effective, process of building coalitions. This conceptual contrast serves as a helpful preface to the ways in which Juliette and her often very disparate cohorts employ differential, rather than oppositional, methods when unwittingly deconstructing what is perhaps the most iconic figure of power across time and place, that of the *pater*.

It is the figure of the father, in fact, that remains a constant throughout the complicated web of narratives woven throughout what some have aptly described not as a documentary, but rather as a 'mockumentary.' Not only do Fabiola and Juliette resemble one another physically at the level





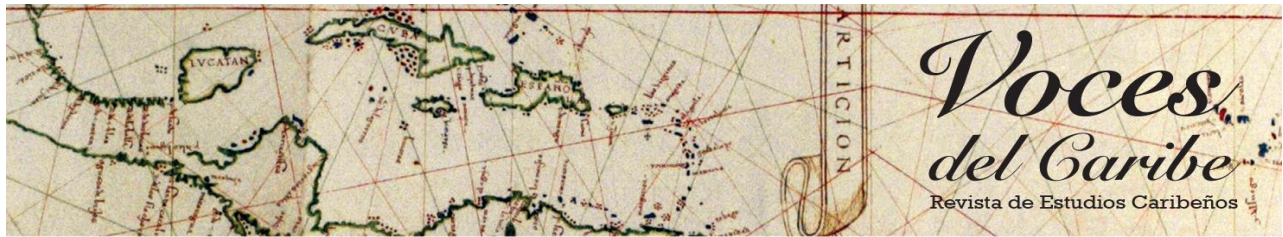
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of body, but also the two female protagonists share the emotional pain and grief of absentee fathers at the level of story and voice. Indeed, the search for the father is what drives the film forward at nearly every turn.

This essay utilizes Chela Sandoval's methodologies of the oppressed to analyze the complex relationships between Juliette, Fabiola, and the many diverse personae who surround them. While some scholars have lamented the many sexualized bodies (especially as this pertains to sex tourism) in their analyses, my reading of the film reveals instead an emancipatory praxis taking firm hold as the film progresses. Sandoval's methodologies—love as hermeneutics, democratics, semiology, deconstruction, and meta-ideologizing—provide the critical lens to uncover what Sandoval has described as differential movement. This dynamic is key to the concomitant goal of building a coalitional consciousness that constantly redistributes power in a horizontal fashion. From the playful use of the humble “papa” to the constant deconstruction and, at times, appropriation, of the phallus, the filmic narrative deconstructs the figure of the father over and over again in innovative and delightfully disruptive ways. Moreover, a temporary coalitional consciousness emerges over the course of the documentary, only to be discarded at the film's end when Juliette is fictively replaced by another young girl in the (again fictive) music video's introduction. As Sandoval notes, her technologies are transitive and meant to disrupt the settlement of power in any one place. Similarly, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* disperses and ultimately subverts the psychic and material stronghold that the power of the father initially has upon the female



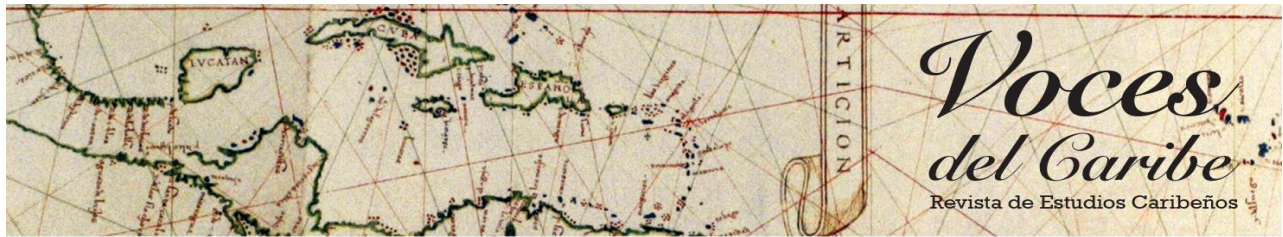


protagonists, Juliette and Fabiola. I should note here at the outset that the analysis to follow refers primarily to the diegetic and mimetic level of the film as narrative, rather than to the more specialized levels of cinematography (such as camera angles, lighting, sound, editing, and the like).

A brief summary of the film is in order before moving on to the analysis just proposed. If you've seen the film, you know that this is not an easy task. The core story in the film is that of Juliette's life: She introduces and describes her family members, her friends, her neighborhood in San Miguel del Padrón, and she recounts her mother's horrific suicide by self-immolation. Juliette also repeatedly voices her anger towards her father for having left his family in Cuba in order to live in the United States, where he began a second family. Other painful memories shared by Juliette include: Being raped by an acquaintance in her adolescence and harsh beatings by her grandmother, Obdulia. Toward the close of the film, she travels to Mexico with the help of the film director, Marcovitch, and while there she ends up meeting her father in a surprise reunion on a symbolic chinampas island that recalls the island of Cuba.

In parallel fashion, a second storyline emerges through Fabiola Quiróz, a Mexican model and actress who performed in a music video directed by Marcovich in Havana in 1993. They met Juliette during the shoot and asked her to act in the video with Fabiola. Marcovich returned to Havana in 1995 and decided to create a documentary about Juliette's life. He did so by intertwining the lives of Fabiola, who also does not know her father, with that of Juliette's. As mentioned earlier, many have referred to it as a "mockumentary" given the invented stories, prescriptive lines,





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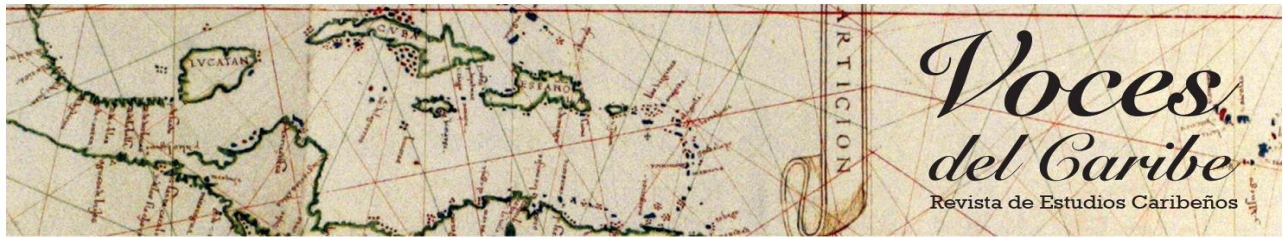
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and silly character swapping throughout the film. The playfulness of the film and how it is put together has been studied by Deborah Martin in her article “Spectatorship, Performance, Resistance.” Martin argues that while the film does resist certain hegemonic structures regarding language, space, and body, it “is ultimately impossible to inscribe within theoretical discourses of resistance and submission” (352).

And yet, Sandoval’s ideas do, in fact, provide a solid foundation for making sense of this complex film, as I describe below. In the very few scholarly studies which have been carried out on *¿Quién diablos?*, the emphasis is squarely upon the female body in terms of sex tourism, performance, exoticism, objectification, and voyeurism. In my analysis, I would like to move away from the female body and instead listen to her voice. What is her story? Why is she consumed by sadness? What makes her feel better both physically and psychically? Curiously enough, by following the female voice we arrive at the *male* body, not the female body. This is what is of interest to me in this essay.

The film begins, perhaps quite symbolically, with Juliette cleaning off the lens of the camera by the ocean so that the spectator can see better. The gaze, the eye, looking, and voyeurism have all been scrutinized in various ways by others (Martin, Suárez *passim*). The tendency in these interpretations has been to associate the eye, especially in the case of Fabiola’s ‘ojos de gato,’ with a sexualized gaze that consumes the female body. What if, however, we considered that the eye represents instead the notion of looking, as in searching for the father? This is especially apparent





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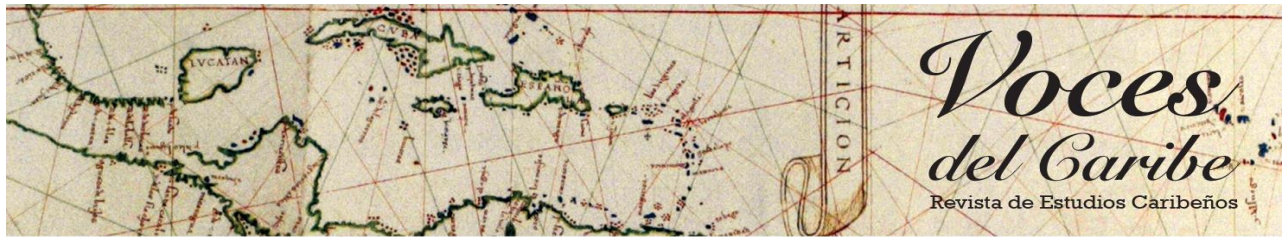
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in the scene where Juliette holds up a photograph of herself and Fabiola side-by-side such that they blend into one face. They share the same father-centered story in this regard. I disagree, in fact, with Deborah's Martin's interpretation of this scene as one in which Juliette desires "to become like Fabiola, to be her or replace her" (344). Indeed, when Juliette is later offered a modeling job by a high-end modeling agency in Mexico, the entire prospect—and the ritzy airs permeating the modeling office—make her not only very uncomfortable, but she rejects the offer rather quickly. I think it is fair to state unequivocally that Juliette is only ever herself in the film, except for a handful of prescriptive moments when the director encourages her to deliver lines that are pre-written for her.

And yet, what I call "character swapping," actually does take place frequently in the film. A young boy is coached to look at the camera and state his identity numerous times. He is Fabiola, he is the oddball character Don Pepe, and he is Jaqueline. These brief interjections seem nonsensical. What to make of this? Are we all interchangeable? Is the director reminding us that while we are viewing so-called real lives, the film intervenes to make them more and more fictive? Juliette tells us early on in the film, in fact, that what we are watching is a complete farce. She closes the film by wondering if there is anyone at all still left in the audience watching the movie.

Chela Sandoval's technologies of the oppressed—in this case love as a hermeneutics of social change—prove invaluable in translating the ebb and flow of these lives and stories. That such a disparate group of people come together to help Juliette feels like a bit of a stumbling block





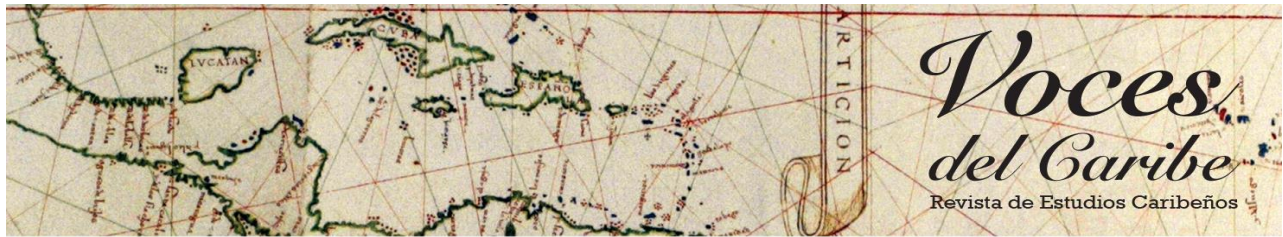
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to the reception of this film. The complicated weaving together of the music video with Juliette's documentary seems like a forced combination. However, the idea of "affinity through difference" put forward by Sandoval could not be more accurate in this case. Perhaps the character swapping dynamic means that it does not matter who we are nor where we come from in order to help one another. At each step in the film, the other characters (from models to pop stars to street people) attempt to assist Juliette in her quest to understand why her father had abandoned his family in Cuba. The film moves from her angry phone calls with him, her visit to the morgue where her mother had been laid to rest, the crew visiting her father in the US to film his reaction to Juliette's performance in the music video, to the final powerfully emotional reunion between them. In what is perhaps the best moment of irony in the film, the very figure who has had so much hold over her throughout the entire film is not even recognized by her in the encounter at first. She does not know who he is until he self-identifies himself as her father. Her reaction is one of astonishment, disbelief, tears, and, eventually, much laughter. The scene closes with Juliette telling her father in a serious and rebuking tone that "they have to talk."

In Sandoval's terms, what is taking place here is the technology of democratics, or, "the centering of identity in the interest of egalitarian social justice (82.3). In her review of Sandoval's work, Layli Phillips of the *Radical Scholar* nicely sums up the concept of democratics as an ethical compass. With these notions in mind, my reading of this film is that Juliette was able to laugh during the reunion with her father precisely because of the disjointed, yet joined, coalition of





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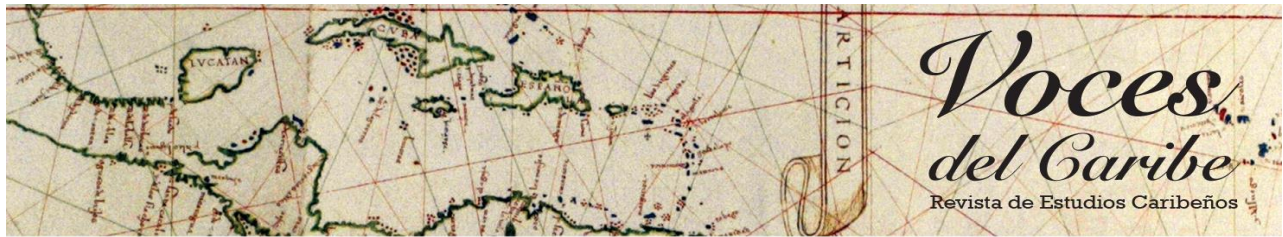
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people surrounding her. As this differential community supports her in her journey to her past and into her future, they also help to free her from the psychic hold of the always-revered-everywhere figure of the *pater*.

With the overarching technologies of love and democracies always running like critical operating systems in the background, Juliette and her community of friends and family manage to decenter the father figure through the more specific technology of meta-ideologizing. Another strategy for social change described by Sandoval, meta-ideologizing is quite simply “the reappropriation of ideology” (111.3). By seizing the tools of the master, if you will, the power of the father figure is dispersed and rendered less harmful. In one scene, for example, Juliette hears a knock on her door and, upon opening, she bursts into laughter as her male friend states: “Hija mía, soy tu padre.” She replies with “Nunca pensaba que eras tan feo.” This same friend on another occasion knocks on the door with a potato and hands it to her when she answers. There is much laughter again, and more word play as she jests that the potato is her roots. These instances of linguistic and semiotic play work to deconstruct the *pater* and bring him down quite a few notches. Juliette and her friend, of course, belly laugh through these moments.

In a related scene, Fabiola finds out that her father’s name was Marco. Like Juliette, she embarks on a mini-quest of her own to find out more information about the father who had been entirely absent from her life. Interviews with her mother reveal that he was Canadian, had beautiful eyes like Fabiola, and was named Marco. The crew attempts to pin down a geographic area where



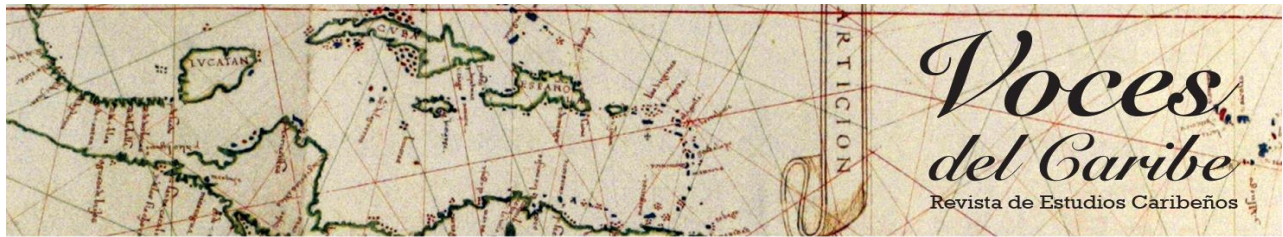


it was known that green eyes tended to surface in the populace. As Fabiola asks around for Marco, she is lead to a store that sells picture frames, or marcos, in Spanish. And, as in the irreverent scene described above with Juliette, she finds much humor in how her search is emptied out of having too much power over her psyche.

These instances of meta-ideologizing pertain more to the psyche than to the body. At the level of body, the phallus is deconstructed and appropriated throughout the movie. Another technology of the oppressed, deconstruction in Sandoval-speak is “the decolonization of meaning” (113). The examples of scenes in which the phallus is deconstructed are numerous. Juliette on two occasions in the film has, quite frankly, unsettling interactions with her toddler cousin. During one encounter, she instructs him to share with the camera what she taught him to do and say to his teacher when he has to go to the bathroom. He promptly licks his hand and grabs his crotch through his pants. On another occasion, she kisses him on the lips intensely and then remarks that his “little pecker is up”. She laughs and adds that it is always up. Taking a cue from patriarchal scripts, Juliette defines her interactions with him on camera through sexualized body parts, as so many men have done to women and young girls diasynchronically across the globe.

Later in the film, Juliette again seizes the weapons of objectification when given the camera to film. Without hesitation and stating that *she* is now the director, she immediately turns the camera to focus in on her boyfriend’s crotch. Not backing off and instead making it the sole focus of her lens, Juliette laughs as her boyfriend tries to push her away because he is clearly





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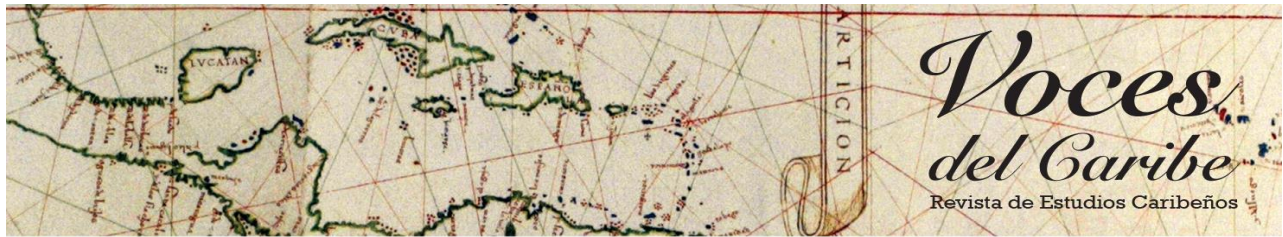
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uncomfortable with the close up shot of his groin. On another occasion, when asked about the Italian tourists who invade Cuban beaches in search of prostitutes, Juliette affirms that they all have very little penises. As Juliette refuses to revere the phallus but rather chooses to mock it in these ways, the viewer cannot help but wonder if her unconventional stance harks back to having been abandoned by her father at a young age. In the opening scene of the film, she defines her father as a “disgrace,” and later she uses this same word to define all men: “men are so naïve, hypocritical, and disgraceful.” In another scene, she shares that her father “doesn’t love anyone, not even himself. And therefore I don’t love anybody either.”

This same mocking tone that functions to deconstruct the meaning of the phallus is also applied by women to women when it comes to being a puta. This dynamic plays out very differently, however. In what is perhaps the best example of meta-ideologizing in the film, women use the term so often that it truly becomes completely devoid of meaning. Everyone is a puta, according to this film. Juliette calls Fabiola a puta, Fabiola calls Juliette a puta, and disinterested bystanders both in Cuba and in New York City shout out that Fabiola and Juliette are a putas. The fact that a homeless man in New York City penetrates Fabiola’s camera space to interject that she is a hooker is very telling indeed. The embedded global premise is that women are hookers everywhere and always have been. This is not Cuba-specific.

The idea that the newly open period of the mid-1990’s in Cuba and the related onset of sex tourism there drive the film forward is, to me, a one-dimensional perspective. While I don’t





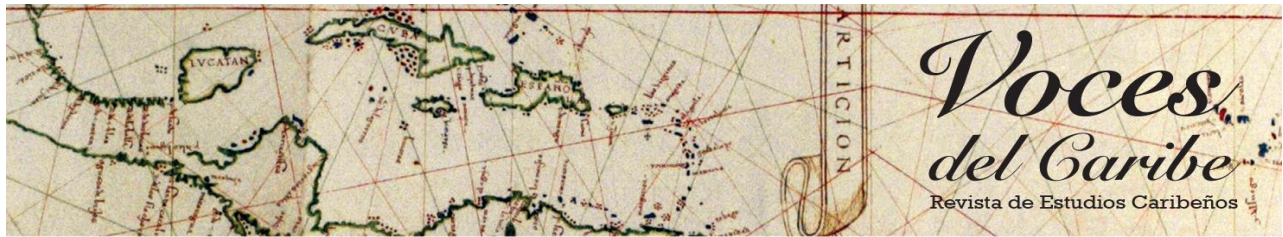
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discount the obvious topic of *jineteras* in the film, I respectfully disagree with scholars who have put the topic front and center in their analyses. Suárez states that the film illustrates “the sexualized representation of poor women’s bodies and lives in different international settings” (155). Martin writes that the film “participates unselfconsciously in the commodification of the Cuban body” (350). Is Juliette really a puta? And does it matter? When asked how many men she has slept with, Juliette responds with an answer that cannot be taken seriously: 30, 50, 60, 100, maybe 2000. She admits that she goes to look for the Italians on the beach at times because she wants the money they provide. As Suárez correctly points out, Juliette “does not engage as a victim. Quite the contrary, she declares that she feels nothing for or with the foreigners” (166). In other words, being or not being a puta does not matter to Juliette as much as it seems to matter to the director and to the viewers. Keep in mind as well that her rapist was not a sex tourist, but rather a family acquaintance who later murdered a fourteen-year-old girl and went to jail for his crime.

What matters much more to Juliette is that her father abandoned her and her family. And, as I stated earlier, by following Juliette’s voice, we are led to the male body, not to the female body. Wise beyond her years, Juliette responds quite profoundly when asked how the movie might end. She replies that the girl in the film can die from whoring, but not from hunger. She then states this same sentence over and over in a very deliberate way. Her attitude towards prostitution here is revealing. She again deflects attention from the female body by downplaying the activity of prostitution in order to instead focus upon hunger as her greatest fear. While it is clear in the film



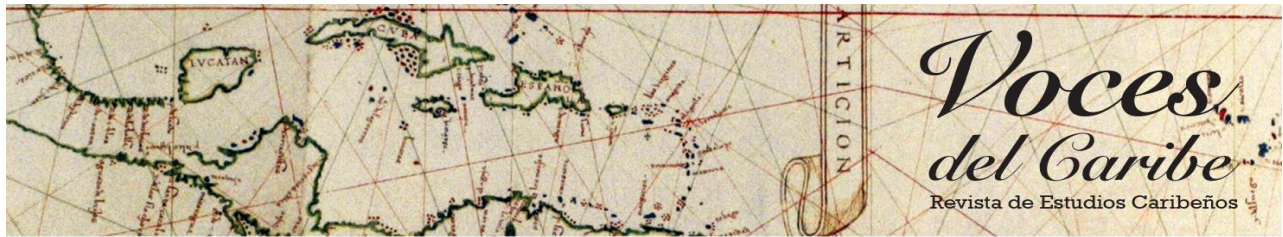


that she does not live in desperate poverty, it is also clear that her family is poor and is barely able to make ends meet. This is surely due in large part to the loss of income that the father had originally provided to the family. The absence of the *pater* means the absence of income which, in turn, means the constant threat of hunger and economic struggle.

And yet, under Sandoval's theories, power is no longer vertical but rather horizontal, and therefore much more difficult to demarcate, denounce, and change. In other words, against whom do we bring charges in this movie for the pain and suffering experienced by the female protagonists? Against Juliette's father? Against a patriarchal world? Against the economic injustices of developed nations toward developing nations? Our list could be endless and is very hard to pin down. Indeed, Juliette discovers in the emerging dialogue with her father that her mother had met another man and therefore had decided to not come to the U.S. Thus, instead of an oppositional consciousness that may be misdirected given the complexity of postmodern power, Sandoval recommends that all come together to create a coalitional consciousness, ie, we are all in this together in order to create positive and lasting social change. Given how Juliette experiences a path of profound healing over the course of the movie, it would appear that her own personal transformation has taken firm root.

I want to close by tying in a scene toward the end of the film, which turns out to be a very fitting metaphor within the context of this particular analysis. During her visit to Mexico, Juliette and the crew visit some of the massive pyramids there. One scene shows a close up shot of her





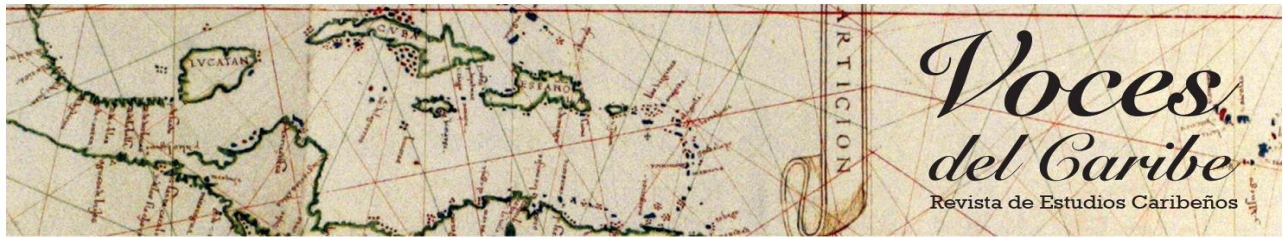
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crying softly at the base of one of these colossal structures. She states that she does not want to walk up to the top because the pyramid is too “alto y complicado.” This image, of the overwhelming pyramid too vast to even begin to engage, evokes the more nefarious positioning of power under postmodernism. The oppressor, if you will, is hard to define and oppose, unlike the well-drawn battle lines of modernism. Therefore, coming together under difference—across categories of race, class, gender, and other categories—means creating opposition through differential movement which, in turn, creates temporary coalitions to effect social change. These coalitions for the greater good will come and go as needed, just as Juliette is replaced by another young girl toward the end of the film in the original music video. And just as so many dissimilar groups helped Juliette rewrite her *pater* script in liberating ways, so, too, do we sense as viewers that Juliette herself will “play it forward.” Whether it is a question of the carefree joy she emanates while dancing with Billy on the beach at the close of the film, or the caring kisses she plants on the face of a homeless girl while sternly quizzing her about her situation, or her hope for a better Cuba, Juliette embodies love as hermeneutics through her empathy.

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