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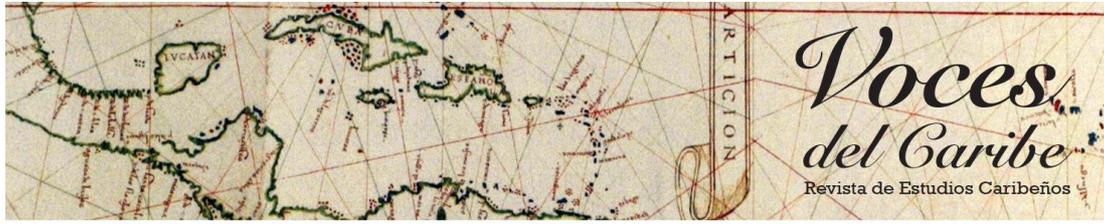
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**Incest and Insight in Himilce Novas's *Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story***

As time progresses and theoretical approaches shift directions, definitions of literature being produced on and off the island of Cuba have become much more complex and inclusive. As Ruth Behar mentions in the introduction of her latest study, Cubans now find themselves in a “post-bridges” moment (6). [1] This temporal space shared by Cuban writers and artists currently includes members from a much larger geographical area and community. Needless to say, we must recognize that the multi-cultured identity of Cuban diasporic writing and art production is vast and almost limitless. The development in understanding new ways to approach Cuban diasporic literature is significant and continues to promote in-depth studies of these prolific writers and artists.

In 1998 Isabel Alvarez Borland coined the phrase “Cuban-American Boom of the 1990s;” marking an explosion of Cuban-American literary





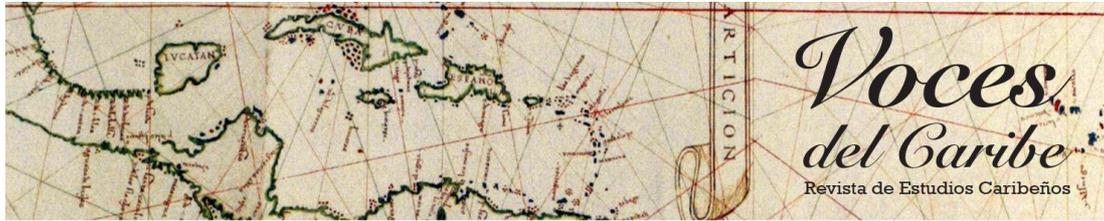
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production in the last decade of the twentieth century, especially from female authors. Critics have looked specifically at Cristina García's work (mainly *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*) and its approach in defining a Cuban-American identity. Publishing during the same decade as García, many other Cuban-American writers have also included fictional accounts of Cuban-Americans and their experience living in the diaspora. These authors, such as Achy Objeas and Ivonne Lamazares, grapple with a plethora of themes that go beyond voyages across the Florida Straits to sexual abuse and undesirable relationships within the family. The aim of this article is to examine Himilce Novas's *Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story*, and analyze the prominence of one such relationship, incest, among her three main characters, Esmeralda, Arnaldo, and Juan. Novas's work presents the negative effects of incestuous relationships and the particular power struggle among family members as a result. In the end, this precarious state leads the protagonist, Esmeralda, to devastating consequences.

Although born in Havana, Cuba in 1944, Novas spent the majority of her life in New York City. Her family fled Cuba in 1960 after Fidel Castro's





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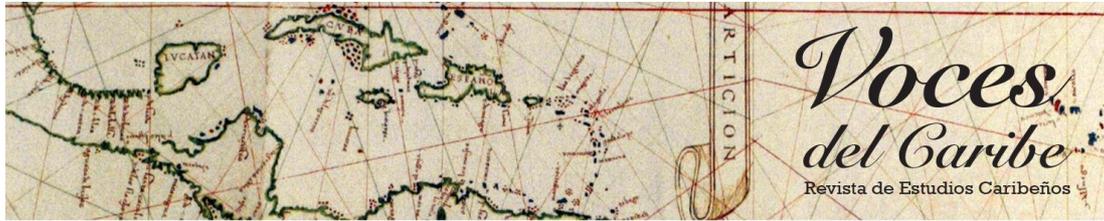
Revolution in 1959 and consequently settled in the United States, joining a large number of Cubans living in the diaspora. Novas's writing career started as a teenager when some of her poems were published in Nobel Prize laureate Camilo José Cela's literary journal, *Papeles de son Armadans*. Novas has had a distinguished career in journalism and has written seven books, both fiction and nonfiction. Her first novel, *Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story*, was published in 1996.

On a basic level, Novas's work functions as a comparison between the effects of the community on a Cuban-American raised in a non-Cuban community in New York and one who was raised among an extended family in Miami. The novel describes the story of estranged twins, Esmeralda and Juan, who meet after 29 years of separation. The twins' father, Arnaldo, takes Esmeralda to New York City after she is born, where she grows up with a warped sense of family and without any real friends. Juan, however, moves to Miami with his grandparents (who he thinks are his parents), a center of Cuban-American culture and community support. Novas creates a distinction between living in Miami, where residents call themselves exiles,



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and New York, where Esmeralda bounces between labels, we find in the quotation that follows, Esmeralda grapples with her diasporic identity throughout the novel. In the first chapter, she is described in this fashion:

[A] Cuban, according to her father, a Hispanic according to the Census, and a New Yorker, as she first called herself before she found a need to cling to her identity by its roots and follicles, and thus called herself Cuban once again... (1)

This act of bouncing between labels complicates Esmeralda's unique situation. Plucked from her extended family in Cuba and forced to live in the cold, harsh environment of New York City, Esmeralda depends solely on her father as a friend and a companion. This predicament sets the stage for her startling relationships.

On another level, Novas goes beyond focusing on representations of the diasporic condition of Cuban-Americans. Her work also incorporates strong taboos, such as incest and cannibalism, that cross cultural boundaries and question social norms in both the US and Cuba. Novas examines the negative effects of incest that occur within the Saavedra family. For this





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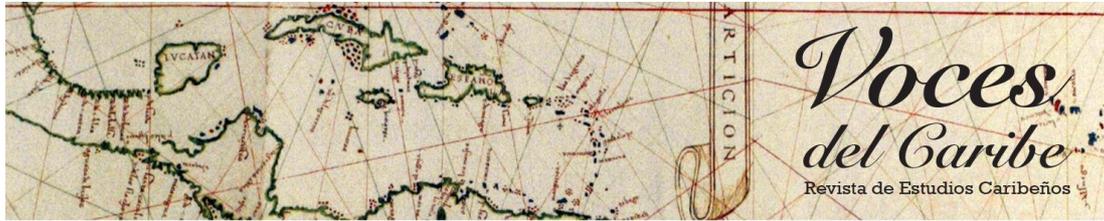
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reason, I believe this narrative deserves an in-depth analysis to examine why these taboos occur and what they add to the overall story. I will first look at some recent studies on incest and sexual abuse and then carefully apply this research to Esmeralda's relationships and behavior.

### **Incest, the timeless taboo**

During the twentieth century, anthropologists and psychologists proposed various theories about incest and its taboo within numerous cultures. According to Anna Meigs and Kathleen Barlow, most of the approaches to studying incest in the last century boil down to three major frameworks: social structural, psychobiological, and psychoanalytic (39). However, they argue that in the last couple of decades new trends in incest research have suggested alternative ways of thinking about the taboo, such as biosocial and social organizational approaches. Yet, the most relevant approach highlighted in Meigs and Barlow's discussion is based on connecting trance and possession with the incestuous experience. In their theoretical framework there is a correlation between the psychoanalytic discussion of dissociation (the splitting of consciousness into separate systems





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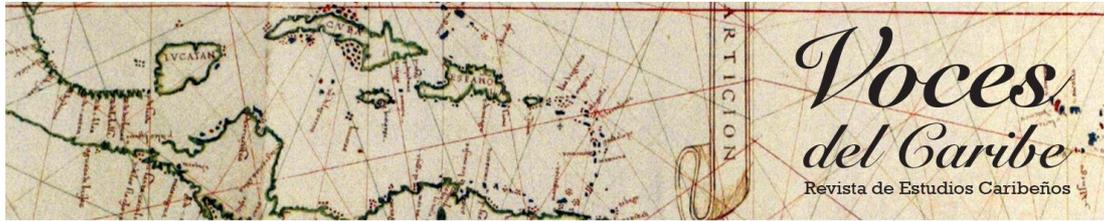
of ideas and memories) and what anthropologists describe as trance and possession (a transient alteration in identity whereby one's normal identity is temporarily replaced by a spirit, ghost, deity, or other person).

Richard Castillo also makes this link in his article published in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*. He states:

The presence of extreme or repeated psychological trauma in the personal histories of a host of psychiatric patients with diagnoses all across the nosological board indicates the possibility of a single common psychological mechanism at the basis of numerous mental disorders that in the currently dominant paradigm are presumed to be discrete, heterogeneous disorders with their own unique biological causations. A number of researchers have already made the suggestion that spontaneous self-hypnosis or trance (the dissociative reaction) during times of extreme stress or life-threatening danger lay at the bottom of much psychopathology. (13)

In other words, Castillo suggests that trance or spontaneous self-hypnosis in cases of severe stress, such as sexual abuse or incest, can be



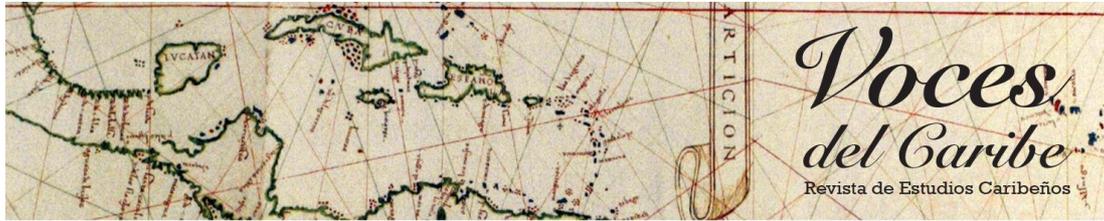


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identified cross-culturally. Moreover, there may be a range of trance-related disorders within the same culture. These disorders span from multiple personality to borderline personality and anxiety issues (13). Interestingly, only a select number of psychologists and anthropologists have studied trance and possession from a psychoanalytic perspective. Furthermore, these social scientists have worked within the classical Freudian paradigm and “thus named trance and possession as states of hysteria (resulting from repression) rather than dissociation (resulting from uncognized and, therefore, split-off experience)” (Meigs and Barlow 45). This perspective claims that bizarre and irrational behaviors are in fact a release of sexual desire and aggression brought on by the instinctual urges for one’s opposite-sex parent. Thus, this model may place the blame on the victim of incest, suggesting that her hysteria or “craziness” stems from her repressed Oedipal desire for her father instead of the extreme stress or trauma she has experienced. In fact, Lynn Sacco argues that this acceptance of Freudian theory is the “latest in a long series of attempts by white middle- and upper-





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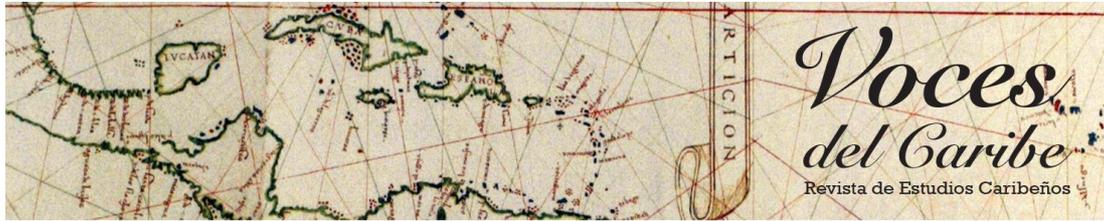
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class Americans to discredit girls and women” or ignore information that exposes the realities of father-daughter incest in the United States (226).

In Novas’s work, we find an explicit trend of incestuous relationships that connect Esmeralda, Juan, and Arnaldo. Undoubtedly, Esmeralda suffers the most from these relationships since she is sexually abused by her father and then falls in love with (and ultimately is compelled to marry) her twin brother. Moreover, throughout the text, the reader witnesses a range of episodes where Esmeralda drifts off into a trance-like state. These incidences share many characteristics that Meigs and Barlow and Castillo highlight in their studies. Although not focused on Cuban-American fictional characters or specifically Cuban-American women writers, these psychologists’ contributions are a necessary tool when analyzing the incest and sexual abuse among family members in Novas’s narrative and provide an innovative approach to better understand this unique novel.

To demonstrate how these theorists give us new insight on Esmeralda’s particular dilemma, I will focus on the specific relationships that she shares with her father and brother.





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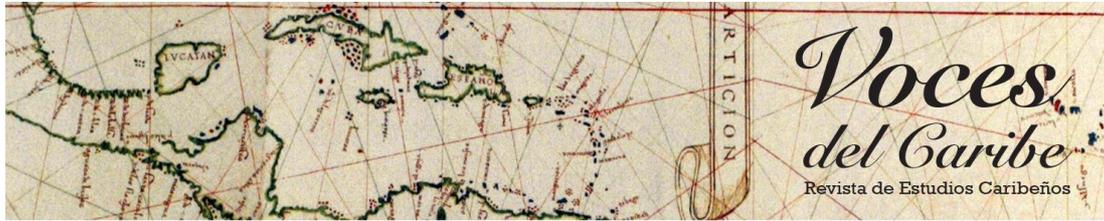
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### Esmeralda and Arnaldo

*Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts* paints Esmeralda as an enigmatic and fragile Cuban-American woman. Very much a recluse, she spends hours immersed in imaginary tales with flying insects that take her traveling to distant lands, always south of the New York City. While sharing her bed with her father, Esmeralda is at first mortified by his presence and physical contact, “[breathing] frantically at his side, begging for air, feeling engulfed in nests of bat-winged roaches and giant spiders” (31). However, as Arnaldo’s visitations persist Esmeralda allows herself to be transported to another world, “where every night she [sees] herself floating on a bed of rainbow-colored butterflies, hovering over sky and sea, free and cleansed by the salt air, swaddled in a soft honeysuckle breeze” (38).

While living in her Manhattan tenement, Esmeralda hears the tale of her birth and rescue from Cuba at least once a month from her father. Arnaldo tells his stories while molesting her, leading Esmeralda to separate her father into two unique personas: night-father and day-father. For her, the narrator explains, “there were two fathers and two lives...and neither one





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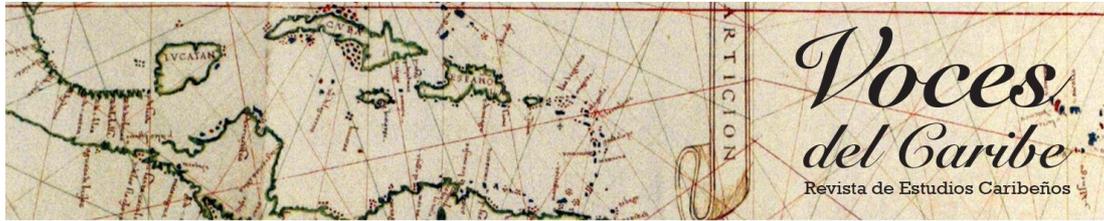
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spoke to the other or knew whether the other was real or imagined” (32).

Night-father/ Arnaldo recounts their long boat trip from Cuba to Key West while holding Esmeralda in his arms and confesses to doing unspeakable acts to save her life, such as killing a young boy named Mejoral and feeding her his blood. Meanwhile, day-father/ Arnaldo is a “simple, kindly man who had difficulty speaking English, except when he quoted from the King James Bible, who worked as a janitor and served a minister of his own church” (32). Arnaldo’s evening accounts lead Esmeralda to feel pity for her father yet leave her scared to connect to mundane pleasures, like plays, parties, or friends at her public school (33).

Throughout the novel Esmeralda seems to struggle with maintaining a steady grasp of reality. She excels in her studies, but her teachers and peers find her disposition strange and juvenile, describing her as “a child of perhaps nine or ten who [carries] on secret conversations with imaginary lizards...” (45). Based on theories mentioned above, her disconnection from reality could be tied to the traumatic sexual abuse she experiences growing





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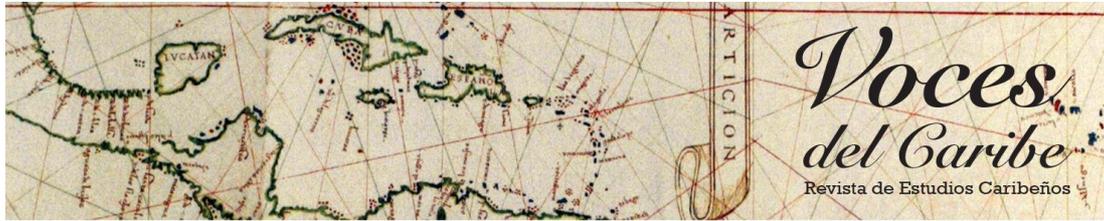
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up. Applying Castillo's ideas, Esmeralda's imaginary worlds allow her to escape her father's mistreatment. He posits:

In [Pierre] Janet's theory dissociative reactions were linked to psychological trauma. [...] An example of this mechanism would be a case of repeated childhood physical and sexual abuse. When the child is under attack, he or she narrowly focuses attention away from the event and thus enters a spontaneous self-induced trance which allows the child to psychologically escape from this intolerable situation. (5)

Similarly, Meigs and Barlow argue that dissociation is one of the main mechanisms that takes part in the process and aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, particularly incest. Thus, Esmeralda's alternate universe, where she escapes from her night-father's frightful advances, allows her to split off profoundly threatening material before it is symbolized or consciously known. Unlike Freud's repression (where known material is relegated to the unconscious), dissociation can permit material to later emerge as "raw, brutal, and terrifying." Thus, the dissociated self may allow for the individual to





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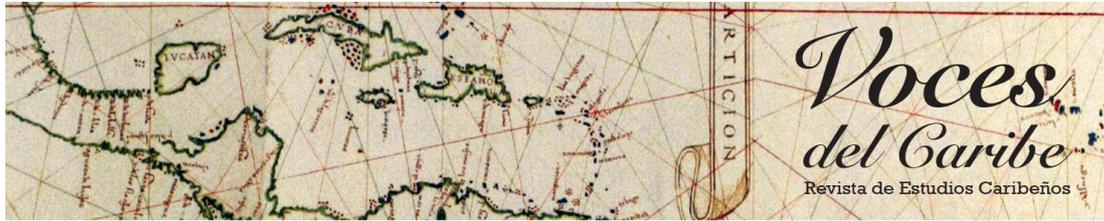
experience split-off rage and hatred associated with the sexual abuse (Meigs and Barlow 44).

As the narrative progresses to where Esmeralda and Juan meet, her relationship with her father sours due to her newfound interest in her brother. The clandestine meetings between brother and sister are short lived since Arnaldo quickly figures out where his daughter is hiding. It is clear that Arnaldo wants Esmeralda all to himself, and his worst fears are realized once Juan enters her life. From this moment on, Arnaldo's jealousy consumes him.

The discovery of Esmeralda and Juan's secret relationship sends Arnaldo into a fit of rage that unfortunately ends in tragedy. Novas's female protagonist reacts with brutal violence towards her father and kills him with a hammer:

While Arnaldo continued his disembodied jabbing into Juan with a force as monstrous as a hurricane, his own daughter, his Esmeralda, who'd pried herself from his Herculean foot that had her pinned against the floor, turned on Arnaldo with Juan's





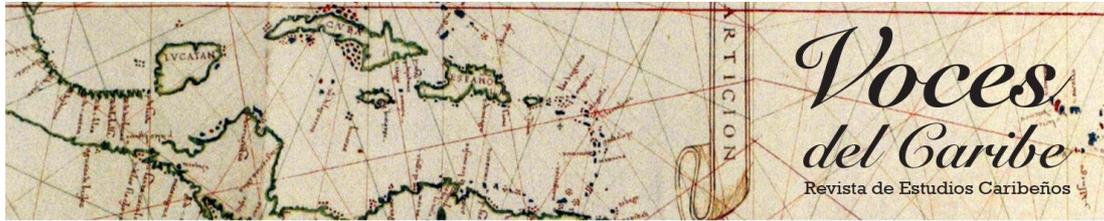
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    painted hammer, the one he used to nail his canvass on the wall. Without reflecting for an instant or asking the Lord Jesus for His help, Esmeralda dealt her father the deadly blow that felt like melting tar on hard cement and split his brown and blood-red coconut head in two. (141)

    Esmeralda's explosive anger and hostility suggest an emergence of her dissociated self and, with one fell swoop, the protagonist commits patricide. For Meigs and Barlow, the appearance of the dissociated self can directly affect the familiar self: "As the dissociated self and its world and relationships emerge, the patient experiences temporary collapse of the familiar structures of self" (44). This implies that an individual with dissociated selves could act out unknowingly. As for the case of Arnaldo's daughter, it is unclear whether she consciously murders her father since the district attorney can never establish if Esmeralda knew what she was doing when she split her father's head in two. Moreover, the realization of Arnaldo's death forces Esmeralda into a state of shock that keeps her "thin and desiccated" from numerous days of fast and thirst, depicting a disturbing





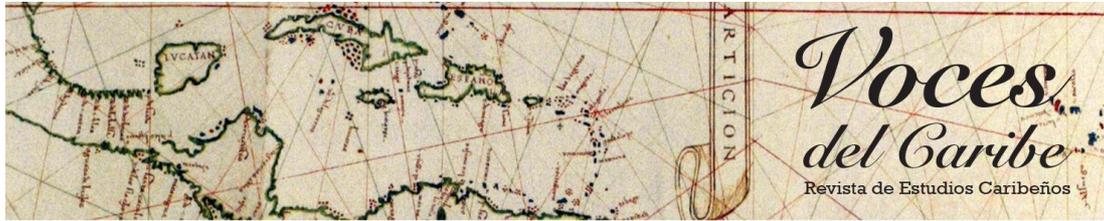
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physical and mental reaction to the event (150). Juan finds her at the brink of death, hiding at the scene of the crime, “frozen under the brass bed, trembling with fear the way she used to while waiting for her father’s visitations in the dark” (148). In other words, it seems as though Esmeralda suffers from a temporary collapse of her familiar structure of self (one that would never harm her father) and relinquishes her body to a dissociated self that contains uncontrollable rage and hatred towards her abuser.

Furthermore, after the bloody climax, Esmeralda loses her ability to “summon” her butterflies and deduces that her imaginary friends have left, “escorting and chasing Arnaldo into the arms of Jesus” (149). The timely disappearance of Esmeralda’s Morpho and Ghost butterflies offers another example of the connection between her father’s sexual abuse and her trance-like states. Although not mentioned specifically in the novel, one particular species of butterfly that ceases to visits Esmeralda, blue Morpho, is highly cannibalistic in its larvae stage. [2] One does not need to look too far to see the association between this tropical butterfly and the protagonist’s cannibalistic meal from her father en route to the United States. As Arnaldo





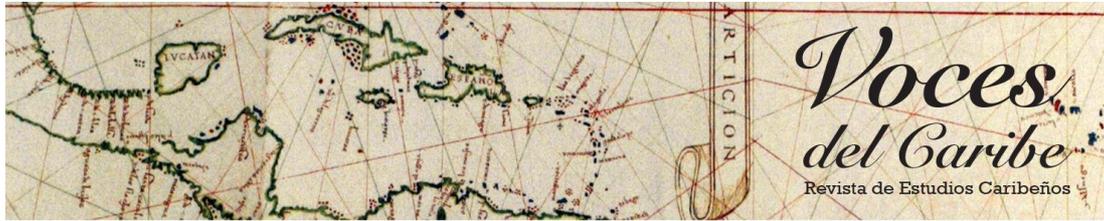
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describes it, murdering Mejoral was “no different than killing a chicken, than killing a squirrel in the fields” (36). However, Esmeralda processes this information as “dark knowledge” that she wishes to store in a secret locked box so she may never have to confront it again (156). Therefore the phantom butterflies may represent another characteristic of Esmeralda’s dissociated self, one that includes odd motor behavior and hallucinations (Meigs and Barlow 44). These aberrations cease after Arnaldo’s death, marking a correlation between the dark secrets of Esmeralda’s past and her fictional acquaintances.

For Esmeralda, Juan is, at first, a blessing since she believes that she has discovered true love and an opportunity to escape her father’s mistreatment. After meeting Juan, “she [can] no longer do what she had done for so many years. She [can] no longer be the vessel for her father’s sorrow or the repository of his sad, misguided longing” (96). In other words, she physically eliminates Arnaldo’s sexual abuse, which is not only a symbolic rejection of his terrifying visitations, but also a move to rediscover reality through her newfound love. When with her father, Esmeralda, who is “still





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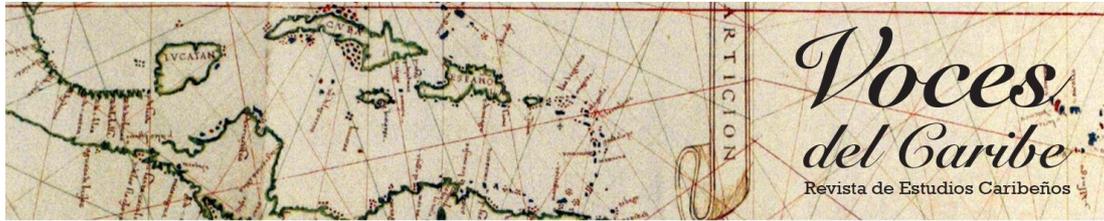
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wrapped in her cocoon,” only can look inward, relying on her trance-like dreams to carry her away. The promise of change, her love for Juan, gives the protagonist hope for a renewed life. This search, however, remains futile as she soon learns the true identity of her lover.

### **Esmeralda and Juan**

*Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts* tackles the theme of incest once again when Esmeralda falls in love with Juan. A significant aspect of the plot, the fact that Esmeralda’s lover is her twin brother, evades her recognition for some time. As I mention above, Esmeralda has an almost child-like personality and her innocent demeanor is contrasted by Juan, who “had embraced so many women he could not recall all of their names...” (75). Poetically described as opposite halves of a coconut or the north and south of a sphere, Esmeralda and Juan also reside in distinctly different geographical locations for the majority of their lives. Nevertheless, after a strange premonition in Miami, Juan unexpectedly wakes up in New York City and sets out to find his other half.





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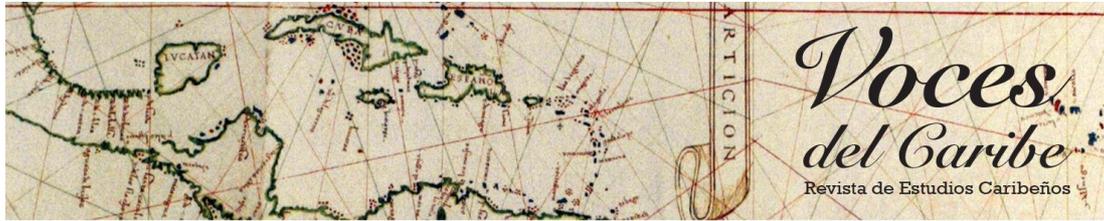
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When the two siblings meet face to face, Esmeralda knows her life has changed forever: “She [Esmeralda] immediately understood that he was Juan Saavedra, her twin soul, her other” (82). Soon afterward, they make love, oblivious to their blood ties:

Juan and Esmeralda stayed there, joined together on that abandoned floor, inventing their lovemaking, a hard lovemaking, fierce and importunate, that suited their yearning and their halves and no one else’s. They clung to each other’s lips, their identical pomegranate lips, and breathed each other’s breath, their identical syncopate breath, until night fell around them and they emerged as one. (92)

Curiously, it is only after the death of Arnaldo that both Esmeralda and Juan realize that they share the same parents. This moment of recognition, the novel’s anagnorisis, reveals a protagonist whose destiny, like Oedipus, leads her to commit both patricide and incest. For Juan, the local police interrogation marks the moment of discovery: “A red alarm had gone off in Juan’s head, as loud as the one that had exploded in Arnaldo’s ears that





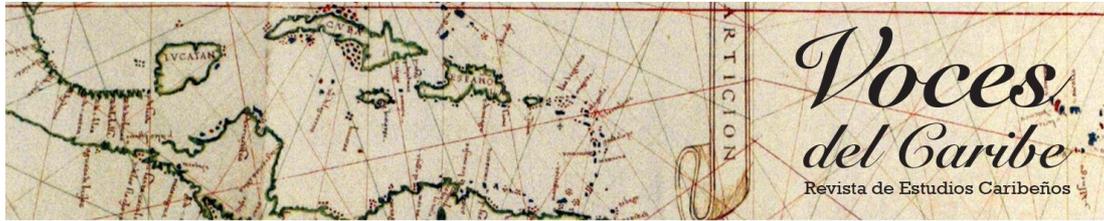
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first day when Juan and Esmeralda lay together for the first time in the abandoned crack house on One Hundred and Eleventh Street” (146). Taking control over the situation, Juan refuses to let Esmeralda suffer from the consequences of the murder, confessing to the police that he, in fact, killed Arnaldo: “[He] did not want the records to show, or history to know, or the Cuban papers in Miami to write that his future wife had been guilty of patricide” (144).

What is particularly striking is that Juan convinces his sister to ignore their scandalous discovery and instead move to Miami where they may continue their relationship. He concocts an intricate plan to lie not only about who killed Arnaldo but also about their blood ties. As Juan puts it, “We will say that your name is something else...Let’s say Esmeralda Mendoza, for example, like your friend the lizard...and that your parents died...” (154). Still stricken with grief from her father’s death and perhaps struggling from mixed feelings about her present lover, Esmeralda is easy prey. Still, fearing that Esmeralda would be “troubled by the obvious,” Juan employs a tactical approach to persuade his twin sibling to go along with his plan (153).





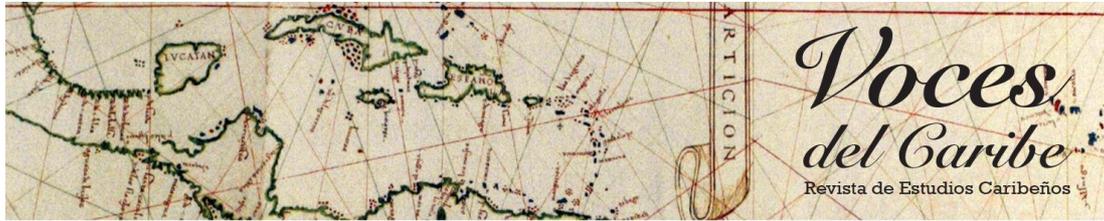
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For instance, when he finds his sister at the brink of death, Juan spits in her mouth the way their father did on their boat while escaping from Cuba. Even though in this case Juan does not kill a young boy and feed it to his sister, he mimics one of the same methods Arnaldo used to revive her years ago. Moreover, while speaking with Esmeralda, he purposefully makes use of biblical vocabulary that Arnaldo frequently wielded in church or at their apartment in New York City, such as the word “asunder” (152). Knowing that his sister could be “reached” this way, as their father had done for years, Juan seals their fate (152). He concludes that his love for her “must override all things” since he cannot imagine his life without Esmeralda (153).

In other words, Esmeralda’s situation does not improve after Arnaldo’s death. In fact, evidence points to a deepening crisis for the protagonist as she is coerced into remaining a victim of incest, this time fraternal. Even if Juan does have good intentions for his sister, he ultimately denies Esmeralda the opportunity to experience a healthy sexual relationship with another man and, I believe, also fails at being a supportive brother. In his introduction of his book, Arthur P. Wolf argues that there is no doubt that incest predisposes





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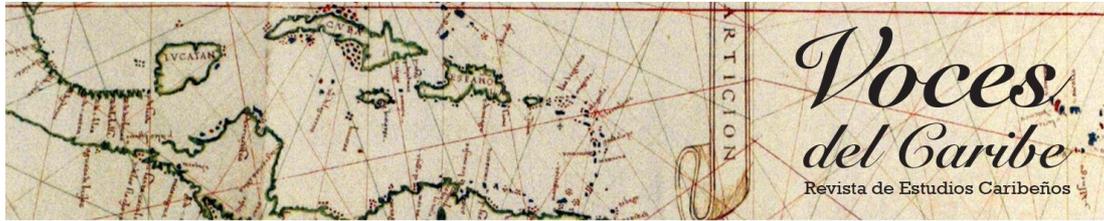
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people to psychopathologies, even though psychologists are still not completely certain why this happens. However, Wolf suggests that the answer may lie in attachment behavior: “The evolutionary purpose of attachment is to elicit caretaking. This is its innate promise. Consequently, sexual advances by a father or brother are disturbing because they deny the promise of caretaking. They threaten abandonment” (20).

In a sense, Juan replaces their father’s dominant position and then, like Arnaldo, manipulates Esmeralda, continuing to deny her healthy “caretaking.”

The protagonist accepts Juan’s marriage proposal because she believes that she has no other option but abandonment. However, Esmeralda admits that she would have preferred not knowing the details of her family’s past and her blood ties to Juan, signaling a desire to dissociate herself once again: “And with those words, Juan summoned up her poor father before her and the day she could not stop the hammer in her hand, and the knowledge of their past, which Esmeralda wished with all her heart she’d never heard the government man tell at all” (156). As Meigs and Barlow suggest, patients struggling with





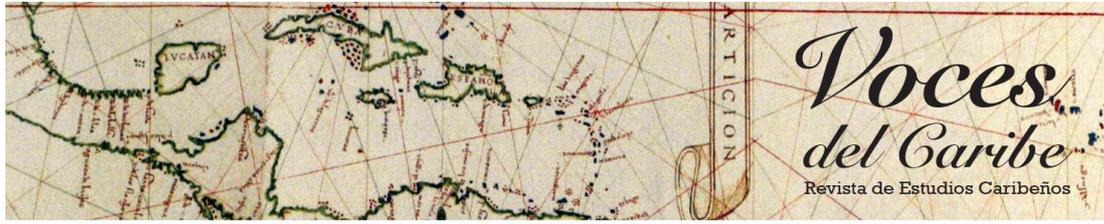
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dissociation benefit from therapy so that they can “meet or know and ultimately integrate” the dissociated self that has experienced the abuse (44). This process can be difficult for the patient and, for Esmeralda, is highly unlikely since she remains a victim of incest and does not seek therapy.

Novas’s novel ends somewhat abruptly, briefly describing the elopement of Juan and Esmeralda and their new life in Miami. Back in New York City, Arnaldo’s parishioners receive word of his daughter’s wedding, flabbergasted by what they read in the newspapers. Knowing Esmeralda’s real last name and that she would not marry in a church “that belonged to the Pope unless she was beaten, gagged and chloroformed,” the faithful followers conclude that Arnaldo’s daughter must have been “tricked” (158). As I suggest above, Juan does persuade his sister into moving to Miami and marrying in a Catholic church. However, I believe that what allows Esmeralda to accept her detrimental circumstance and falsified identity is the fact that she begins to dissociate this new threatening material, just as she did when her father sexually abused her. Once free from her trance-like states





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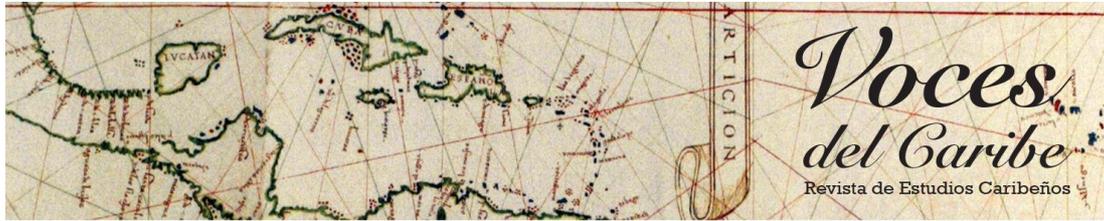
and butterfly visitors, Novas's protagonist finds herself withdrawing from reality and society all over again.

Intriguingly, the narrator's last words hint on Esmeralda's renewed coping mechanism: "It was not reported, for there would be no one to tell or understand that two months after the wedding, Esmeralda had once again been visited by her butterflies..." (159). Although only lightly suggested, the future of Novas's female protagonist seems predestined for a life plagued with imaginary insects leading her on a path to another possible psychological (and physical) collapse.

### **Conclusion**

After a thorough examination of Esmeralda's relationships with both Arnaldo and Juan, her bewildering behavior and overall demeanor begins to make more sense. As disquieting as the protagonist's actions are, I believe that there are some logical reasons why she comports herself in this peculiar fashion. We can trace a progression of specific episodes where Esmeralda dissociates herself from negative elements in her quotidian life. In other words, she distances herself by self-induced, trance-like states, allowing





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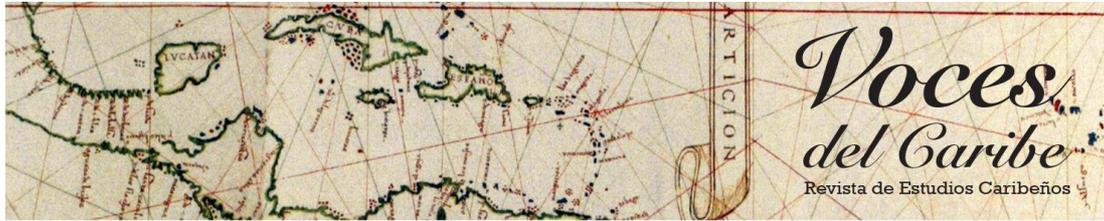
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make-believe animals and bugs to carry her away to foreign lands. This coping mechanism permits Esmeralda to temporarily function within society, succeeding in school, holding a part-time job and even marrying her twin brother. Nevertheless, the culmination of repeated sexual abuse and incest cannot be completely subdued. This is not seen more clearly than when Esmeralda violently kills her father.

Furthermore, as the narrator alludes, Novas's protagonist only seems to gain a little respite after the death of her father as she is thrust once again into an unhealthy relationship, which is full of lies and deceit. And these lies aim to cover up her family history which, in turn, just pushes Esmeralda further away from reality: "The bride's name was reported in the papers as Esmeralda Mendoza, and the groom, Juan Ona, was happily photographed at her side with his proud parents, Mr. and Mrs. Mario Ona, distinguished members of the Cuban American community" (157).

By making the connection between dissociation and trance-like states and sexual abuse, we are granted some insight into the protagonist's mental processes. Esmeralda undoubtedly struggles to maintain a stable grasp on





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reality, but she does find specific coping mechanisms to survive. With the aid of recent studies on incest and sexual abuse, we are able understand why Esmeralda portrays such erratic and, sometimes violent, behavior. In the end, Novas creates a nontraditional Cuban-American love story that questions social norms and delves into the psychological and anthropological effects of paternal and fraternal incest.

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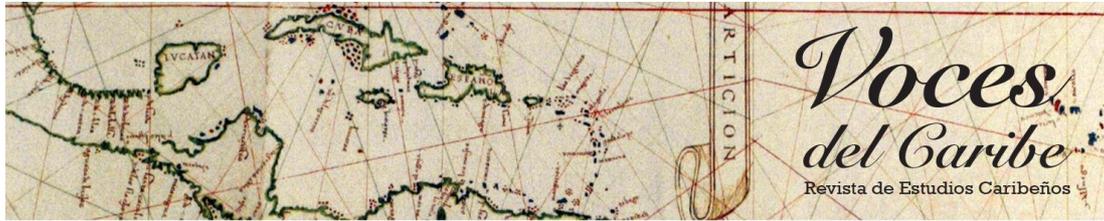
#### End Notes

[1] By referring to her earlier book, *Bridges to Cuba*, Behar sets out to form a new vision of the Cuban search for home that is more international.

[2] For more, please see Cynthia D. Kelly, Shannon H. Neaves, Laurence D. Zuckerman, and Michael W. Davidson's study from the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory at The Florida State University.

<http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/optics/olympusmiccd/galleries/butterfly/bluemorphor6.html>





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