

Watching from the Door Frame

Y Tú Mamá También and *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* through the lens of Audre and Adrienne

This semester I took a class called *Latin Lovers: Sexuality and Gender in Latin American Literature, Film, and Pop Culture*. We watched, listened to, and read a multitude of works that dealt with exactly that, and I've found myself reflecting on which of these stories are uplifted in the so-called "canon" and why. While I won't interrogate the idea of the canon itself here (that's another essay in itself), I will say that the two films I'm going to talk about are at polar opposite ends of the spectrum. The first, *Y Tú Mamá También*, was nominated for two oscars and at the time of its release in 2001 was the second highest grossing Spanish language film in the United States. The other, *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos*, doesn't even have a wikipedia page. When looking at these two films through the lens of revolutionary feminist theorists Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, I don't think it's too hard to see why.

The text I will return to again and again is Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". Rich argues that heterosexuality is a political institution, rather than an inherent preference or choice that women make to be attracted to, and dependent on, men. Compulsory heterosexuality then, is the ideology that fuels this institution. She draws from historical examples across time and space with great detail, outlining the characteristics of male power and how they serve to enforce compulsory heterosexuality, sistemically driving women away from other women in the search for love and tenderness in their lives. This makes it incredibly difficult for women to define their own sexuality, and by extension their *existence*, in a way that is not in conversation (to put it kindly) with men. In fact, it's impossible to even reach

for self-definition as a woman without acknowledging that compulsory heterosexuality is an oppressive force.

For Rich, the radical response to compulsory heterosexuality is lesbian existence. This is not just the idea of a woman existing in a sexual or romantic relationship with another woman. Rich states that it first “comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (Rich 649). It is also distinctly *female*, dealing with the specific plight of the erasure of women’s sexuality. This is why Rich is so adamant that her work on compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence should not be applied in equal measure to male homosexuality. This in itself, as she says, is an erasure. All of this is very important to note as the first of the two films I deal with, *Y Tú Mamá También*, is first and foremost a story of two men who are attracted to each other. I, however, see a very grim narrative of compulsory heterosexuality just under the surface when the film is seen through the eyes of Luisa, the supporting female role.

The first thing to note about *Y Tú Mamá También*’s Luisa is that out of all of the film’s principal characters, she is the only woman. This isolation wholly prevents her from what Rich calls “woman-identification”, meaning “the casting of one’s social, political and intellectual allegiances with [women]” (Rich 645). The screenplay does not provide her with any other women to align herself with. As I mentioned, the movie is really about these men--boys really, as I’ll refer to them throughout--Julio and Tenoch. Childhood best friends (with completely irrelevant girlfriends who appear in the beginning before going on a trip to Italy), they meet Luisa at a wedding and dare her to go on a road trip with them to a beach they don’t believe actually exists. They name the beach Boca del Cielo, or in English, Heaven’s Mouth. This will be

important later. To their surprise, she eventually agrees to go, and the three embark on their journey. So, for the vast majority of the film, Luisa is flanked by the two boys.

Yet, this is not where her immersion in a male world ends. Her emotional weight in the film is entirely defined by two other men who we never really meet. The first is her husband, Tenoch's cousin, who admits that he's cheated on her. All we see of this relationship is the misery she experiences as the victim of this cheating, and further implies a revelation that she never really loved him. At least, not like she loved the other man who defines her, her first love, who died in a tragic motorcycle accident. These two men, in these two heterosexual relationships, have brought her nothing but strife.

Further still, throughout the movie, it appears that Luisa's only motivations emerge as a result of male desires. Julio and Tenoch, boys, ask her to go on this road trip in the first place. She decides to leave Jano because he cheated on her. Even her lost love seems to justify the way we see her show up in the film in real time, years after the loss occurred. Due to her place as the only woman in this landscape, Luisa is not provided with the choice to seek a relational mode outside of the heterosexuality that is forced upon her. Rich concludes by emphasizing that more than the condemnation of heterosexuality itself, which has been relatively more acknowledged in the feminist sphere, "the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women...will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives" (Rich 659). The way that Luisa is robbed of this choice mirrors this systemic issue to which Rich gives voice. Is there any way Luisa could escape this fate? In a way, yes, but this will come back around.

Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos could not be more different in the landscape of sexuality it presents. First of all, the gender breakdown of its leading characters is all women. The

protagonist is Mariana, a woman in a lesbian relationship with Fernanda (more of a supporting character) as they live together in Mexico. The site of conflict for the film is in Mariana's return home to Argentina to visit her mother, Ceci, the other leading player, and her father, who is in a coma hidden away in their house.

Ceci does not approve of Mariana's relationship, so the movie immediately deals with the theme of homophobia. But more importantly to me, the way that the story is structured challenges compulsory heterosexuality in messy and complicated ways. About a third of the way into the film, Ceci sets up Mariana for lunch with her ex-fiance Mauricio (nice, right?) and Mariana reveals the deeper reason she left Argentina. In a long, chilling shot that slowly zooms closer and closer in on her face, Mariana describes a sexual encounter with her father that he initiated, but she enjoyed. The kicker? Her mother was watching from the door frame. This was the catalyst for her to flee the country and subsequently enter into a relationship with Fernanda. And, as we learn, as she was fleeing burgeoning sexual feeling toward her father, she also fled her engagement to Mauricio.

This reveal unlocks the rest of the movie. In the following scenes, Mariana's father becomes an overbearing presence that taints every interaction between her and her mother. It becomes clear that the tension between them is far less over Fernanda and far more over the only man in the house. They compete for his affections emotionally, and most evocatively, sexually. The climax of this tension erupts when Mariana attempts to bring her father back to consciousness by masturbating to him, again in front of her mother. The only man present doesn't even have to say anything, he can literally be in a *coma*, and *still* have a monopoly of power. All female affections and desires are, at their core, directed to him.

Rich asks a question that *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* deals with quite directly: “Why does male-identification--the casting of one’s social political and intellectual allegiances with men--exist among lifelong sexual lesbians?” (Rich 645). Though we never know the nature of Mariana’s past sexual relationship with Mauricio, we do know that she is having sex with her girlfriend. And in Mariana’s experience, her male-identification even goes as far as to enjoy sex with her father. How does this happen? Rich deftly claims that “However woman-to-woman relationships, female support networks, a female and feminist value system, are relied on and cherished, indoctrination in male credibility and status can still create synapses in thought, denials of feeling, wishful thinking, a profound sexual and intellectual confusion” (Rich 646). This place of profound confusion is a place few directors and writers would dare to go. With all this in mind, I believe *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* to be a film that really *interrogates* compulsory heterosexuality as an ideology, rather than being complicit, falling prey to the institution like *Y Tú Mamá También*.

However, the way that I think *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* does fall prey, unintentionally, to the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is in this “layer of the lie” that Rich outlines: the “implication that women turn to women out of hatred for men” (Rich 658). If Mariana had not been violated by her father, if a fear and hatred toward him had not developed, would she ever have entered a lesbian relationship? This is unclear.

To peel back another layer, Rich explains that, “Lesbian existence is also represented as mere refuge from male abuses, rather than as an electric and empowering charge between women” (Rich 658). This is definitely true to me in *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos*. The relationship between Mariana and Fernanda is rarely even shown. Outside of the very first scene, when Mariana wakes up and leaves Fernanda in bed, physical affection beyond a brief kiss between the

two women is simply not shown. More damning still is the fact that an emotionally intimate relationship between them is not at all developed, by virtue of the fact that they spend nearly the entire film apart. While I understand that the emotional heart of the film is the mother-daughter relationship, the effect of essentially choosing to not show the two lesbian women interacting perpetuates this lie. Even a work that questions the heterosexual institution so directly is not immune to leaning on an old, harmful stereotype to carry forward its plot.

We now need to turn back to Julio and Tenoch, the boys at the center of *Y Tú Mamá También*, to more fully unpack this film and give it credit where credit is due. The true heartbeat of the story is the inability of the boys to face their romantic and sexual attraction toward one another. As I watched it all unfold, I couldn't help but think of Audre Lorde, specifically her landmark work "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" throughout. Unlike Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality", Lorde keeps this one *short*, and the prose goes down like a smooth bourbon that warms your body and mind from the inside out. I'd highly recommend you read it in full. I'd actually order you to read it in full. Until you do, what you need to understand about Lorde's notion of the erotic is that it is a "resource within each of us... firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling", exactly the kind of unexpressed and unrecognized feeling that Julio and Tenoch deal with in their relationship (Lorde 87). While Lorde primarily deals with the way women have been conditioned to suppress the erotic in their lives, she notes that "The male world... fears this depth [of feeling] too much to examine the possibility of it within themselves" (Lorde 88). Director and Co-Writer Alfonso Cuarón shoots the film in a way that turns the pain of this male fear of the erotic into a poem.

Cuarón beautifully highlights one of the dichotomies Lorde draws out between eroticism and pornography. Lorde positions the pornographic in opposition to the erotic, as "a direct denial

of [it], for [the pornographic]...emphasizes sensation without feeling” (Lorde 88). This sensationless sexuality occurs quite blatantly between Luisa and Tenoch, as she seduces him in a seedy motel room on an overnight stop. The language she uses, and the sex as a whole, is transactional. She bargains with him, coercing him into masturbating by offering to show her breasts. She blows him, then asks him to blow her. And it’s all over in a matter of seconds. Julio watches the whole thing happen from the door frame (sound familiar?). The omniscient narrator (a key formal device throughout the film) reveals that the only other time Julio had felt that degree of hurt in his gut was in a repressed childhood memory, when he caught his mother cheating on his father with his godfather.

Right after this sensationless, “plasticized” (to borrow another word from Lorde) sexual encounter with Luisa, the boys immediately seek refuge in the erotic. Tenoch joins Julio by a pool covered in dark brown leaves, and asks him to race across it. They dive below the muddied layer of their consciousness (metaphorically) and naked, swim through translucent waters. This image, heavily reminiscent of Nirvana’s *Nevermind* album cover art, employs the sensuality of the water to represent the repressed erotic. When the boys come up for air, they’re back to denying, hurling heterosexuality at each other as a weapon, as Julio claims to have fucked Tenoch’s girlfriend before they left on their trip. For a brief moment under the surface, Julio and Tenoch can share each other’s deep feelings on an instinctual level, but it’s fleeting, before they again, to use Lorde’s words, “us[e] [the other’s] feelings as we would use a kleenex” (Lorde 90). This back and forth is devastating to witness.

While *Y Tú Mamá También* may beautifully embody the perils of pornography corrupting eroticism, I’d like to return the focus to Luisa. I’ll remind you again that the film completely fails to interrogate compulsory heterosexuality from a feminist perspective. While the boys do

eventually get to experience true intimacy with each other at the climax of the film, the only sexual experiences Luisa is granted during the course of *Y Tú Mamá También* are in the pornographic context. However, she does have quite a profound experience of the erotic that parallels the pool scene. Thank God, some kind of respite, right? Remember that escape “in a way” that I brought up earlier? This respite is in death. We find out quite suddenly at the end of the film that Luisa was aware of a bad cancer prognosis before she agreed to go on the boys’ road trip. This places her spontaneous decision to finally leave Jano and find Heaven’s Mouth beach much more...literal. The final image we get of Luisa is swimming in the waters of heaven’s mouth, at one with a deep, erotic knowledge, which we now know is the fact that she’s going to die.

That’s awfully bleak.

Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos is far less so. In the end, what breaks open radical feminist possibility for these women is the death of the father, which I view as the metaphorical death of the patriarchal family structure. In the dearth of that dominating force, lesbian existence can truly emerge. As a reminder, Rich’s definition of lesbian existence is far more expansive than lesbian sex. As she says, it is meant “to include a range...of woman-identified experience...including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny” and “the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (Rich 648, 649). Beyond simply the fact that Mariana and Fernanda engage in a lesbian relationship on a sexual/romantic level, I believe Rich would place all *three* women (Mariana, her lover and her mother) on the same lesbian continuum. In the absence of the father, there is, for the very first time, a real possibility for these women to support each other through the birth of Fernanda’s child and beyond. Oh, yeah. Fernanda is pregnant. There’s a lot going on in this movie, okay?

This possibility is communicated through the cinematography of the final shot of *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* as well. The perspective of the camera looks forward with the three women in an open frame. They are sitting among a natural landscape in Ceci's backyard that looks like Spring, the season of re-birth. Notably, this same shot, coming from the opposite direction (read, so you can see the women's faces), is the movie poster. Here, Mariana is even holding a plant, if you were looking for even more proof that this is an optimistically feminist film.

The structure of *Y Tú Mamá También* does not afford any kind of radical possibility to Luisa, Julio or Tenoch. Luisa exists in an emotional and sexual world bereft of other women. Oh, and she dies, completely shutting off the potential of ever finding even the idealized heterosexual bliss of her lost love, let alone a liberatory community of women or a true sense of self outside of male institutions and relationships. And while Julio and Tenoch don't end up dead, the final line of the film reveals that after an emotionally detached reunion in a diner a year or so after the road trip, the two men will never see each other again. This places them among those who Lorde deems the unintentional, or "those who do not wish to guide their own destinies" (Lorde 88).

The final nail in the coffin here is also in the formal construction of the moment. Remember when I mentioned that "Voz en Off", also known as the narrator? The whole movie, there is literally a narrator guiding the characters' destinies for them. The world of *Y Tú Mamá También* is predetermined, fated, a tragedy as old as time. To the Spring of *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* is the Winter of *Y Tú Mamá También*, with Julio and Tenoch wrapped up in puffy jackets, cold breath fogging up the glass of the diner window. To the open frame of *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos* is a closed door.

Considering the vast differences in the ways these two films end, it's worth finally returning to the question of their relative relevance to a broad audience. It is unfortunately no

surprise to me that in the one with two Oscar nominations and significant international distribution, the men end up fundamentally unfulfilled and the woman ends up dead. While of course there are a myriad of factors that play into a movie's reception and legacy, I would challenge you to find a film with *Y Tú Mamá También*'s level of cache that explores compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence to the degree of *Lo Que Nunca Nos Dijimos*, faults and all. I hope listening to this has given you a few tools and frameworks to think deeper about the media you consume, especially media marketed as LGBTQ or feminist. Not all representation is created, and should not be analyzed as, equal.