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THE PORTRAYALS OF FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS
IN MARY DI MICHELE'S POETRY

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To my grandmother, whose love and support I miss every day.

To my grandfather, whose eyes I saw crying while teaching me how to waltz.

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ABSTRACT

THE PORTRAYALS OF FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN MARY DI MICHELE'S POETRY

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA
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This thesis analyzes the poetry of the Italian-Canadian writer Mary di Michele focusing on the portrayals of fathers and daughters. The father-daughters relationship reveals two dilemmas. The first dilemma is characterized by acceptance or rebellion by the daughters in relation to the traditional patriarchal father's role. The second dilemma is characterized by keeping or abandoning the Italian traditions in a new land. The objective of this thesis is to analyze di Michele's poems which portray the role of father and daughters in traditional patriarchal Italian families observing how cultural displacement causes a clash in socio-cultural traditions, such as patriarchy. In order to achieve this objective, the concepts of patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness are discussed in the first chapter of this thesis along with a critical review of the relevant literature on di Michele's works. In this section, some authors whose works I discuss are: Adrienne Rich, Angelika Bammer, Fred Wah, Gloria Anzaldúa, James Clifford, Judith Bennet, Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Walby and Smaro Kamboureli. The second chapter analyzes how the portrayal of the father and his patriarchal conduct will be influential to the daughters' upbringing. The third chapter analyzes how the daughters are portrayed to comprehend their position of sustaining or abandoning their father's traditions as a consequence of displacement. The fourth chapter analyzes how gender and cultural questions of the daughters' upbringing influence their life choices, especially their choices of partners. This thesis concludes that the father is portrayed in an oppressive and authoritarian way characterizing a patriarchal society of emotional oppression. His behavior does not lead to happiness, relief from tiredness, nor satisfaction in relation to his daughters' choices. The daughters' life choices reflect a criticism about family and marriage

conditions due to them feeling uncomfortable with the partners they have chosen which either lead them to live unhappily submissive as slaves to their husbands or to subvert patriarchal norms by revolting against them.

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RESUMO

OS RETRATOS DE PAIS E FILHAS NA POESIA DE MARY DI MICHELE

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Esta dissertação analisa a poesia da escritora ítalo-canadense Mary di Michele focando nos retratos de pais e filhas. O relacionamento entre pai e filhas revela dois dilemas. O primeiro dilema é caracterizado pela aceitação ou rebelião por parte das filhas em relação ao tradicional papel patriarcal do pai. O segundo dilema é caracterizado pela sustentação ou abandono das tradições italianas numa nova terra. O objetivo desta dissertação é analisar os poemas de di Michele que retratam o papel do pai e das filhas em famílias italianas de tradição patriarcal observando como o deslocamento cultural causa um choque em tradições sócio-culturais, como o patriarcado. Para atingir esse objetivo, os conceitos de patriarcado e entre-cultura são discutidos no primeiro capítulo desta dissertação juntamente com uma revisão crítica da relevante literatura sobre o trabalho de di Michele. Nesta seção alguns autores cujos trabalhos eu discuto são: Adrienne Rich, Angelika Bammer, Fred Wah, Gloria Anzaldúa, James Clifford, Judith Bennet, Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Walby e Smaro Kamboureli. O segundo capítulo analisa como o retrato do pai e sua conduta patriarcal irão influenciar na criação das filhas. O terceiro capítulo analisa como as filhas são retratadas para compreender a posição delas de manter ou abandonar as tradições de seu pai como consequência do deslocamento. O quarto capítulo analisa como questões de gênero e de cultura da criação das filhas influencia as escolhas de vida delas, especialmente as escolhas de parceiros. Essa dissertação conclui que o pai é retratado de forma opressiva e autoritária caracterizando uma sociedade patriarcal de opressão emocional. O comportamento dele não o leva a felicidade, alívio do cansaço, ou satisfação em relação às escolhas das filhas. As escolhas de vida das filhas refletem uma crítica sobre família e condições de casamento por causa delas sentirem-se desconfortáveis com os parceiros que elas

escolheram; o que as leva a viver submissivamente infelizes como escravas dos maridos ou a subverter as normas patriarcais revoltando-se contra elas.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	01
Chapter 1 – “How we in the world are all connected”	07
Part I – Getting to know the world of Mary di Michele and her works.....	07
Part II – A clash in socio-cultural traditions: understanding patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness ...	11
Chapter 2 – The king, the god, the <i>valentino</i> , the <i>babbo</i> , and other portrayals of fathers and their displaced Italian traditions ...	15
Chapter 3 – To be like the mother or to be a <i>putane</i> ? Acceptance and rebellion in the portrayals of displaced daughters	22
Chapter 4 – Daughters who grow up to discover the millionth part different in themselves	35
Final Remarks	45
References	48
Appendixes	52

APPENDIXES

Tree of August (1978)	53
Casa Mia	53
First Communion	54
Sunday Dinner	54
1001 Nights	55
Bread and Chocolate (1980)	57
Bread and Chocolate	57
1952	57
Waiting for Babbo	59
The old Pontiac	59
Ave	60
Enigmatico	61
Dark Nature	61
Mimosa and Other Poems (1981)	63
Mimosa	63
I. Mimosa	63
II. Marta's Monologue	66
III. Lucia's Monologue	70
The Story of a Marrying Man	73
White Lies	75
Necessary Sugar (1984)	77
Bloody Marys	77
Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New (1995)	78
Born in August	78
How to Kill Your Father	78
The Disgrace	79
Life is Theater or O To Be Italian Drinking Capuccino on Bloor Street At Bersani & Carlevale's	81
Other Poems	
Daddy (by Sylvia Plath)	83

INTRODUCTION



The specific context of this thesis is the work of the poet and novelist Mary di Michele. Maria Luisa di Michele — known in the literary world as Mary di Michele — was born on 6 August 1949 in Italy, in a traditional patriarchal family. She is the eldest daughter of the three children of Concetta and Vincenzo di Michele. She lived in Italy up to 1951, in Belgium up to 1953 and, finally, immigrated to Canada in 1955 with her mother, brother and sister, where her father had already been settled for a year in search of a better life for his family.

Now di Michele lives in Montreal, Quebec, where she is a full professor at Concordia University. She has already published eight collections of poetry: *Tree of August* (1978), *Bread and Chocolate* (1980), *Mimosa and Other Poems* (1981), *Necessary Sugar* (1983), *Immune to Gravity* (1990), *Luminous Emergencies* (1990), *Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New* (1995), and *Debriefing the Rose* (1998). Her first four collections portray Italian roots in the form of personal and familial histories, and also related to the experience of cultural displacement, whereas her last four collections present the modern and urban world through the use of satire, irony and interrogations about what is new. In addition, she is the author of two novels: *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Tenor of Love* (2005) and an anthology of poems: *Anything is Possible: A Selection of Eleven Women Poets* (1984).

The poem “Born in August,” first published in the collection *Tree of August* in 1978 and later republished with some alterations in *Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New*, is an example of the presence of di Michele’s history in Italy. Some details of di Michele’s origins in a period of great historical turmoil, World War II, are presented:

Born in the fifth house
 under the sign of Leo
 on the sixth of August,
 four years after Hiroshima
 180 years after the birth

of Napoleon Bonaparte,
 born Maria Luisa di Michele,
 baptized at Santa Lucia
 in an ancient town, Lanciano,
 of the single miracle, since the middle
 ages, the host, bleeding for you.
 Born in the wake of World War Two,
 in the green, though scarred, hills of Abruzzo,
 where the Allied guns and the German guns
 rendezvoused. All I knew of this history were family
 anecdotes yet for years I dreamt of low flying
 planes overhead, dropping their exploding cargo.
 Austerlitz, Auschwitz, Hiroshima! (1-18)

This poem presents some personal information such as birth date, astrological sign, the poet's name, and a city of birth together with some historical facts of World War II. In this case, the consequences of being born in the same period of a war are portrayed in the poem, connecting personal history to collective history.

Besides the consequences of living in a period of historical turmoil, the experiences of physical and emotional displacement are also presented in di Michele's poems. Di Michele's own dislocation from Italy to Belgium and later to Canada together with the experiences of other immigrants provided her with enough material to write about the feeling of outsiderhood. In "Research Notes on Mary di Michele," – published in *Mary di Michele: Essays on Her Works* (2007) – Joseph Pivato states that di Michele feels excluded "from the great tradition of English poetry" because she is "an Italian Canadian, a woman and an immigrant" (186). Di Michele not only felt as an "outsider" from the Canadian literary tradition but also an "outsider" in her "family and ethnic community," as she mentioned in an interview to Pivato in 1984, republished in the collection of essays aforementioned. In addition, di Michele stated that this outsiderhood feeling was also felt with the "larger, public society" because of her "ethnic identity and female character" (193). Consequently, the feeling of outsiderhood is very much present in di Michele's work.

One of the collections in which this issue is present is *Mimosa and Other Poems* (1981), winner of the CBC Poetry Prize in 1980. The main theme of the first part of this collection is the portrayals of the world of Italian immigrants in Canada. This world of Italians who immigrated to Canada is portrayed through depictions of family gatherings; reflections and memories of the past in Italy; and, finally,

depictions of women and men. These depictions are portrayed in the family circle relations, for example: between parents and their children, among the couple and among the children themselves. Besides, these depictions are also established with the other people with whom they have contact, for example, other immigrants, teachers and friends.

Di Michele's work is situated in the group of contemporary Canadian poetry by immigrant women, which is the general context of this thesis. Under this group I include Canadian poets who were born outside Canada, as well as some who were born in Canada with significantly distinct cultural background. These authors's cultural background is important because it appears in their writings through the portrayals of their own experiences and also of the experiences of other people from their communities. Besides di Michele, some of the representatives of contemporary Canadian poetry by immigrant women are Claire Harris (born in Trinidad), Daphne Marlatt (born in Australia), Dionne Brand (born in Trinidad), Himani Bannerji (born in Bangladesh), Jamila Ismail (born in Hong Kong), Janice Kulik Keefer (born in Ontario, with a Polish background), Joy Kogawa (born in British Columbia, with a Japanese background), Lilian Allen (born in Jamaica), among others.

The works of the aforementioned poets address the political, social, and cultural contexts which they come from and in which they are settled now. Their writings are often called by critics as "minority literature," a denomination which leads them to be regarded as 'outsiders' in the literary tradition. Nevertheless, according to Smaro Kamboureli, in the introduction to the anthology *Making a difference: Canadian multicultural literature* (1996), the work of women writers — as well as the work of other multicultural Canadian writers — "is not minority writing, for it does not raise issues that are of minor interest to Canadians. Nor it is, by any standard, of lesser quality than the established literary tradition" (3).

According to Kamboureli, these writers' work is characterized by the portrayals "of the relationship of their cultural origins to their writing" (6) sustaining "a link with the past" (13) since the mother land is a frequent present theme of personal and political conflict; and by paying "homage to histories that one cannot afford to forget" due to the power of recollections of the experiences they have gone through. According to Adrienne Rich in "The Genesis of 'Yom Kippur 1984'," "there is a tendency to treat poems — at least in certain circles — as a sort of documentation on the poet's life, as perhaps a kind of autobiography" (252). I agree with Rich when she states that "a poem is

not a slice of the poet's life, although it obviously emerges from intense places in the poet's life and consciousness and experience" (253). As a result, this thesis will consider the portrayal of di Michele' and her communities' experiences as what Rich denominates "transmutation," since "something has to happen between the breathing in of experience and the breathing out of poetry. It has been transformed, not only into words but into something new" (253). The use of subjectivity in her poems was one of the themes of an interview to Ken Norris in 1991, when di Michele stated that:

I like to write using "I" because of the sense of intimacy it creates in the text, because objectivity is as distorted a perception of reality as subjectivity, but subjectivity seems more honest to me. So readers sometimes assume that all the experience I attach to "I" is my own. But the experience is as often imagined for me as it is from my own actual life in its source. It is also imagined, or a fiction, even when the poem begins from a specific personal experience. Memory changes everything, memory selects and heightens, obscures and shapes experience, and when we remember, we remember with everything we know about life and about language. That's why, or how, the personal experience is placed *con* [or with] text, a life *con* text is not a private affair. It's not just me I'm talking about or it wouldn't be worth writing down, so I might indeed be embarrassed. My life is fairly conventional; my imagination, my passions, however, are operatic. (8-9)

The personal experiences and conflicts of multicultural writers, such as di Michele, when brought to a new culture often reflect dilemmas of diaspora or some other kind of displacement. Kamboureli states that diasporic literature is characterized by themes such as "[t]he experience of displacement, the process of acculturation or integration, the gaps between generations, [and] the tensions between individuals and their communities" (13), themes which are present in most of the aforementioned immigrants' works who represent contemporary Canadian poetry by women.

In particular, these writers had to face displacement due to the immigration they have experienced, so they had to pass through a process of reflecting upon their origins in order to be able to either adapt to the culture of the country they were brought to or to resist and criticize this forceful adaptation. Also, Kamboureli affirms that the concern of women writers, more specifically, are "[t]he questions of how gender is constructed, how the representation of gender impinges

upon desire and sexuality, how who we are as (...) women relates to where we come from" (15). Therefore, these women's place of origin plays a major role in their lives by helping them to build who they are as women. Overall, the experiences of their origins appear in their writings as a dialogical context for the discussion about gender. Two notions to be further discussed in the next chapter are displacement and cultural in-betweenness.

Considering the major themes of di Michele's first four collections — the portrayals of the world of Italian immigrants in Canada — I selected the portrayals of fathers and daughters in her writings to be the focus of this study. These portrayals are present the role of fathers of traditional patriarchal Italian families and the role of the daughters in relation to the heritage they have received. The dialogue between fathers and daughters mainly reveals two kinds of dilemmas. For this reason, another aspect to be discussed in the next chapter is the concept of patriarchy.

The first dilemma is characterized by acceptance or rebellion by the daughters in relation to the traditional patriarchal father's role. In a patriarchal culture, women are denied an equal role in society through their imprisonment to housework, underpaid jobs, physical and emotional violence to which they can accept or rebel but never without emotional and physical consequences. The second dilemma is characterized by keeping or abandoning the Italian traditions in a new land, as di Michele's characters live in-between cultures, Italian and Canadian. Her characters are immersed in a dilemma taking into account that physical displacement does not imply forgetting one's culture of origin in order to simply absorb a new culture.

Considering the issue of cultural in-betweenness portrayed by di Michele in the construction of her poems, this study also analyzes how cultural displacement is addressed by di Michele in these portrayals of fathers and daughters since their Italian traditions do not suit the Canadian context in which their families are living now. The relationships between fathers and daughters will be analyzed taking into account two main concepts: patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness — which, as already mentioned, will be discussed in detail in the first chapter of this study. Concerning the context aforementioned, the objective of this thesis is to present an analysis of di Michele's poems which portray the role of fathers and daughters in traditional patriarchal Italian families observing how cultural displacement causes a clash in socio-cultural traditions, such as patriarchy.

I have four tentative hypotheses concerning the role of fathers and daughters in traditional patriarchal Italian families in di Michele's poetry. My first hypothesis is that the father is portrayed in an oppressive and authoritarian way. My second hypothesis is that the daughters are portrayed either in a position of subversion or in a position of acceptance and repression. My third hypothesis is that sustaining or abandoning Italian traditions in a new land, a consequence of the clash caused by displacement, is strictly correlated to how authoritarian the father is and how repressed or eager to subvert the norms the daughters are. And finally, my fourth hypothesis is that the daughter's life choices — including their choices of partners — reflect the cultural experiences they had in their childhood and adolescence.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to present a discussion and arrive at conclusions concerning these four hypotheses through the analysis of some of di Michele's poems selected mainly from di Michele's first four books of poetry which explore features of cultural displacement, immigration, and childhood memories. Especially significant will be the analysis of "Mimosa," from *Mimosa and Other Poems* (1981), since it was the poem that first called my attention regarding the depiction of "Italian-Canadian heritage, family dynamics and a woman's ambivalence towards patriarchal society" (Pivato 206) through the portrayal of Vito, an Italian-Canadian patriarch, and his two daughters, Marta, the subservient, and Lucia, the rebellious daughter.

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. Chapter 1, entitled "How we in the world are all connected'," will present a critical review about of di Michele's works relevant to this analysis and a discussion on concepts of patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness. Chapter 2, entitled "The king, the god, the *valentino*, the *babbo*, and other portrayals of fathers and their displaced Italian traditions," will present the analysis of representations of fathers in di Michele's poetry. Chapter 3, entitled "To be like the mother or to be a *putane*? Acceptance and rebellion in the portrayals of displaced daughters," will present the analysis of representations of daughters in di Michele's poetry. Chapter 4, entitled "Daughters who grow up to discover the millionth part different in themselves," will present the daughter's life choices — including their choices of partners — and how they reflect the cultural experiences they had in their childhood and adolescence. Finally, I will present a chapter with the final remarks to the hypotheses of the study, as well as the significance of the research and suggestions for future research in the area.

CHAPTER 1 “HOW WE IN THE WORLD ARE ALL CONNECTED”

The title of this chapter was taken from the title of the poem “Dovetail, the verb, or how we in the world are all connected” (*Luminous Emergencies*, 1990). The aim of this chapter is to discuss criticism on di Michele’s work, and the notions of patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness, key concepts for the focus of my study, in order to connect these pieces of information to di Michele’s poetry by better understanding her characters and their dilemmas. The chapter will be organized into two parts. In the first part, the critical pieces to be reviewed include a thesis, a dissertation, some essays, interviews, among others. The second part will present notions of patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness and others related to them to be used in the readings of di Michele’s poems.

Part I – Getting to know the world of Mary di Michele and her works

One of the most encompassing theoretical works developed so far about Mary di Michele and her works is Michael Morgan Holmes’ essay — entitled “Mary di Michele” — published in 1995. The essay is definitely worth reading because it contains relevant discussions about some poems from the collection *Tree of August* (1978) up to *Luminous Emergencies* (1990). In order to better understand di Michele’s works, Holmes proposes three concerns or motivations in di Michele’s poetry, which are: “ethnic heritage, female identity, and the confessional impulse” (166). The discussion of these three concerns served as motivation for the development of this study.

The first concern proposed by Holmes — ethnic heritage — has to do with di Michele’s Italian upbringing in Canada which provided her with enough experience to talk about the culture and traditions from Italy and also about feelings of displacement in relation to Canada. Holmes states that di Michele’s upbringing in Canada did not provide her with “any sense of coherent cultural or personal identity” and that she “had to resist [to a form of assimilation] in some way if her personal and cultural identity were to remain intact” (160). For this reason, the imposition of two cultures: the Italian — at home — and the Canadian — at school — resulted in a great impact on di Michele’s personal life and in how she connected with the world. As a consequence of this impact, the “motif of a return journey ‘home’” (168) is transmuted by di

Michele to her works constituting one of the themes of her first collections.

Moreover, according to Robert Billings in “Discovering the Sizes of the Heart: The Poems of Mary di Michele,” the “naïveté, frustration and the resulting anger inherent in adjusting to a new culture” characterizes literature written by the generation of the immigrants’ children — group which di Michele belongs to (100). Especially significant to Billings is the concern of this group for “heritage, childhood and self-definition” which are motifs of reflection in di Michele’s poems to be analyzed here. In addition, this second generation of immigrants, according to Susan Iannucci in “Contemporary Italo-Canadian Literature,” “retain[s] a strong sense of the values that have motivated their parents’ emigration and many sacrifices [motivations which are translated in guilty] because they cannot accept their parents’ expectations and way of life” while at the same time “they find it hard to hack a different path through the wilderness for themselves” (216-217).

Di Michele brings this guilt to her works when she deals, for instance, with the issue of ethnic heritage through Lucia in “Mimosa”. Lucia confesses such feeling when she says: “so much of my life has been wasted feeling guilty / about disappointing my father and mother” (397-398). Lucia feels guilty for not being able to follow her parents steps and wishes for her, while, at the same time, she realizes that “if I give it [her life] to them, it won’t make them young again, / it’ll only make me fail along with them” (405-406). According to Corrado Federici in “The Gravity of Mary di Michele’s Poetry,” the display of di Michele’s ethnic heritage appears in three forms. First, in “the linguistic echoes of the culture left behind when the parents immigrated to Canada” through the use of words in Italian to characterize their food, festivals or ways to refer to each other. Second, in the “images of the immigration phenomenon as it affects the immigrant other” through di Michele’s portrayals of the experiences of Italian families who had to immigrate to Canada in search of a better life. And finally, third, in “autobiographical recollections,” which represent di Michele’s experiences brought to her work in the form of confessional impulse — also the third concern proposed by Holmes, to be further discussed.

The second concern proposed by Holmes — female identity — relates to the construction of female portrayals through the presentation of women’s lives, families, problems and feelings. Naturally, di Michele’s upbringing in a traditional patriarchal family provided her with enough experience to comprehend women’s condition in that kind

of society. As Holmes observes, the fact that “the di Michele family operated as a traditional patriarchal unit” allowed her to observe that her mother — Concetta — was “the model of domestic behaviour against which di Michele eventually rebelled,” in addition to being aware of her father’s plans for her and her sister to “settle down, marry and bear children” (159). Further evidence for this is presented in the interview to Joseph Pivato, in 1984, when di Michele asserts that her mother “had very traditional views” in relation to her daughter’s role, that what was expected from her was “to marry and have children” (193). In addition, di Michele reflects upon her experience of growing up in a “very patriarchal” family stating that she had to rebel against the role her family was expecting from her (192). Therefore, most to her parents’ surprise, di Michele grew up developing an interest for “challenging patriarchal normativeness” (Holmes, 168) which was translated in her personal decisions and academic choices; later on, these experiences were recreated in her poems which portray criticism of family and marriage conditions.

Some female portrayals are discussed by Lisa Bonato in her thesis *Mother and Daughters in Italian-Canadian Women’s Narrative* (1994). In this work, Bonato analyzes the story of mother and daughters in some of di Michele’s poems, as well as part of the work of Maria Ardizzi, Caterina Edwards and Mary Melfi. In relation to the portrayals of the daughters, she concludes that, as Italian-Canadian women, they are “situated in a unique position where they are marginalized doubly through gender ethnicity resulting in their portrayal being dominated by the themes of alienation and the split self” (38-39). And in relation to the mothers, Bonato states that their portrayals are shaped by “themes of silence, isolation, and exile” illustrating the idea of “mothers as cultural transmitter and family mediator” (91). Therefore, women have to overcome not only the traumas of immigration, of a patriarchal father but also of a submissive mother.

And finally, the third concern proposed by Holmes — the confessional impulse — discusses the presentation of personal experiences through memoirs in which personal identity mixes up with social identity. According to Holmes, di Michele’s poems do not present “pure, naïve autobiographical accounts” since they are “carefully crafted revelations of often dark, painful memoirs and experiences” (169). By presenting her personal experiences through confessional impulse, di Michele was able to “bridge the gaps between herself and others — principally other women” (169). In addition, di Michele’s use of a confessional tone while writing is the issue discussed by Marion Natalie

Cooke in her doctoral dissertation *The Fictive Confessions of Audrey Thomas and Mary di Michele* (1990). In this work, Cooke establishes a comparison between Thomas's and di Michele's work. In sum, Cooke proposes that both authors "attempt to reveal the story, rather than close themselves off from it" while eliminating the boundaries "between author and speaker" (158-159). In relation to di Michele, Cooke concludes that in her early work the speaker "is closely identified with herself" (228), while in her recent work di Michele has "adopted the role of listener (...), inviting her readers to listen with her so that, together, they may reach a better understanding" (229). Billings concludes that "di Michele seems most comfortable and most effective not in the third person, but in her own voice or the first person voice of a persona" (112-113) when discussing issues of conflicts within the family and cultural dislocation.

Moreover, according to Robert Billings, in "Contemporary Influences on the Poetry of Mary di Michele" (1985), this writing about the self, and by implication, about other women in general, was due to what di Michele shares with four poets: Roo Borson, Susan Glickman, Carolyn Smart, and Browen Wallace (124-125), the latter with whom she jointly published *Bread and Chocolate/Marrying into the Family*. Billings' essay is relevant to this study due to his affirmation of what di Michele shares with these authors: "a feminist outlook, an ambition to write as well as they are able, and a dedication to aesthetic principles as a means of presenting them" (135). In addition, for dedicating herself so much to her writings, and for exposing inner issues with such quality, Billings praises di Michele by stating that her "reputation has grown steadily and, more importantly, been deserved" (123). Di Michele has already acknowledged her concern for the valorization of women's writing in the interview to Ken Norris when she stated that "[t]here is an energy and vitality in women's poetry today that can't be ignored" (6).

Concluding the first part of this chapter by taking into account di Michele's three concerns according to Holmes: "ethnic heritage, female identity, and the confessional impulse" — I verified that the issues of female identity and confessional impulse have been extensively addressed in the critical works about di Michele written so far, not only in essays and interviews, but also in a thesis and a doctoral dissertation.

On the other hand, ethnic heritage has received less attention; therefore, I intend to explore the connections of this issue with cultural displacement in the depictions of traditional patriarchal Italian families. Furthermore, it is the purpose of this work to fill in this gap of studies

through the analysis of the portrayals of father and daughters depicted in di Michele's poetry taking into account the issue of patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness, which will be defined in the following part of this chapter.

Part II – A clash in socio-cultural traditions: understanding patriarchy and cultural in-betweenness

This study will be carried out through a feminist and cultural approach to di Michele's poems which deal with the portrayals of fathers and daughters in Italian and Canadian contexts. Wilfred L. Guerin et al, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, have proposed that feminist criticism has a "threefold purpose:" "to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and criticism" (184). In order to understand the first aforementioned purpose of feminist criticism, the first objective of this section is to establish a definition of patriarchy which will be further discussed in the analysis. The second and the third purpose will be verified throughout the analysis of the poems resulting in the association of a feminist and cultural reading of di Michele's poetry requiring, thus, the definition of cultural in-betweenness as well.

In relation to the definition of patriarchy, Adrienne Rich states, in *Of Woman Born*, that it is characterized by "the power of the father: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men — by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (57). In addition, Guerin (1992) proposes that a "patriarchal culture" is the "one organized in favor of the interests of men" (182). These interests are imposed through authoritarianism and, according to Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, in *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, are "usually defended as the 'natural' consequence of human biology" (221). Moreover, the patriarchs have the power to take decisions of social consequence which denigrate women's role in society subjugating them emotionally, physically, socially and economically. Reinforcing the idea of emotional and physical oppression, according to Sylvia Walby, in *Theorizing Patriarchy*, this is a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (20).

As a result, women in a patriarchal culture are denied an equal role in society through their imprisonment to housework, underpaid

jobs, physical and emotional violence, among others. Some modifications have occurred in the patriarchal system along the years but the outdated notions that “[t]he first guardian of a woman was her father; in his absence his male relatives performed this function” and “[w]hen a woman married, she passed into the hands of her husband” (Simone de Beauvoir 92) still prevail. The “notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one” (Sylvia Walby 20) goes against di Michele’s beliefs. She demonstrates her anger against female exploitation, oppression, domination through the portrayals of female resistance since, according to her in the interview with Pivato, “it is important that the woman’s point of view be heard, that women stop being silent and speak out against the violence of a patriarchal society” (196). In other words, women have an active role in this process, they not only have to be listened by other people, but they have to voice what they think, like or dislike, what they believe is fair or unfair, among others. However, as Judith Bennett criticizes, in *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, “women have not been innocent of collusion with patriarchy; some have supported it, some have benefited from it, and most have raised their daughters and sons to conform to it” (56). This criticism is also present in di Michele’s work as will be observed in the analysis of the poems in the subsequent chapters.

Besides confronting the patriarchal system, immigrant women also have to face what Angelika Bammer calls displacement. In *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, the concept of displacement is discussed and exemplified in many essays organized by Bammer. The conceptualization of displacement in her introduction to the collection is useful as a starting point for understanding this term. According to Bammer, displacement is “the separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles, or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture” which constitutes “one of the most formative experiences of our century” (xi). Unfortunately, most displaced people suffer with the cultural and physical dislocation since they have “[a] desire for eventual return, [an] ongoing support for the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (247), which are some of the main features of diaspora according to James Clifford, in “Diasporas.” Still according to Clifford, a strong connection with their previous homeland needs to exist in order to “resist erasure through the normalizing process of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing” (255). In addition, Clifford lists some of

the negative experiences of diaspora: “discrimination and exclusion” (256) and also “loss, marginality, and exile” (257). These feelings of loss, marginality and exile will be observed mostly in the portrayals of the fathers while the daughters mostly express their anger against discrimination and exclusion (at school when they are young, for instance).

In relation to cultural in-betweenness, in *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*, Fred Wah states that an ethnic writer needs to figure out “where she is, where to go, how to move, not just through language but in the world” (56). This need of finding one’s place in the world reflects — in di Michele’s case — her physical dislocation from Italy to Canada where she had to learn a new culture, a process which is depicted in some of her poems. The imposition of a foreign culture usually starts with the need to learn a new language. According to Alice Yaeger Kaplan, in “On Language Memoir,”

[t]here is no language change without emotional consequences. Principally: loss. That language equals home, that language is a home, as surely as a roof over one’s head is a home, and that to be without a language, or to be between languages, is as miserable in its way as to be without bread. (63)

Displacement through language cooperated to increase di Michele’s feelings of discomfort and this struggle with a new language appears in some of di Michele’s characters’ portrayals, such as the patriarch, Vito, in “Mimosa.”

Vito is not the only character in di Michele’s poems who lives in between two cultures, who feels what Gloria Anzaldúa characterizes, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, as “to live in the Borderlands,” when contradictorily “you are at home” and at the same time “a stranger” (216). Di Michele’s poems to be analyzed in this study depict personae who experienced surviving in the borderland, when, according to Anzaldúa one “must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads” (217). In other words, the immigrant must learn how to coexist with the cultures from which one came and in which one is settled now since, as stated by Anzaldúa, “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (102). This experience is illustrated in di Michele’s “Enigmatico,” from *Bread and Chocolate*, when a woman has to live “with one bare foot in a village in the Abruzzi, / the other busy with cramped English speaking toes in Toronto” (15-16) as a metaphorical portrayal of cultural

displacement. The “bare foot” is located in an Italian village while the other is in an urban space. In this poem, the woman is suffering from the physical dislocation while her legs try to keep together two different cultures, causing her not only physical but also emotional pain. These lines of this poem characterize what Fred Wah (2000) calls “the hyphen.” The hyphen, for Wah, consists of

that marked (or unmarked) space that both binds and divides (...) [t]hough the hyphen is in the middle, it is not the centre. It is a property marker, a boundary post, a borderland, a bastard, a railroad, a last spike, a stain, a cypher, a rope, a knot, a chain (link), a foreign word, a warning sign, a head tax, a bridge, a no-man’s land, a nomadic, floating magic carpet, now you see it now you don’t. (72-73)

The experiences of the personae created by di Michele in her poems characterize this situation of in-betweenness described by Bammer, Clifford, Kaplan, Anzaldúa and Wah through their difficulties in accepting the immigration to a new territory, having to learn a new language, learning how to coexist in-between two or more different cultures, and, sometimes, living with the burden of a rich historical-cultural past. Therefore, the objective of the following chapters is to analyze how cultural displacement is addressed in di Michele’s poetry through her construction of the portrayals of fathers and daughters which are culturally displaced since their Italian traditions do not suit the Canadian context in which they live now.

CHAPTER 2
 THE KING, THE GOD, THE *VALENTINO*, THE *BABBO*,
 AND OTHER PORTRAYALS OF FATHERS AND
 THEIR DISPLACED ITALIAN TRADITIONS

In this chapter my purpose is to analyze some poems by Mary di Michele in which the figure of the father is portrayed. For this reason I have chosen to analyze poems from di Michele's first three collections: *Tree of August*, *Bread and Chocolate*, and *Mimosa and Other Poems* in which the figure of the father and family relationships are some of the main themes. This analysis will discuss a variety of portrayals of fathers and their patriarchal conduct, in most cases through the perspectives of their own daughters (the protagonist of most poems). This observation of the portrayal of the father will be relevant to the discussion of the daughters' upbringing in traditional patriarchal families and how these daughters respond to their upbringing (the focus of the next chapters of this thesis).

Di Michele's first collection — *Tree of August* — presents some of the first poems in which the father is depicted. In "Casa Mia," the portrayal of the father appears in juxtaposition with the figure of the mother. While the mother is cooking for the family in the kitchen, the father is shown as a meditative person in the following lines:

and then the perpetually
 awkward silence of the indolent
 lips of our Father,
 poet without a word (8-11)

The father is depicted as an introspective person who apparently does not communicate much with his family even though he probably has things to say. In these lines the father is compared to a poet who has no words to say; a voiceless poet like patriarchally oppressed women, or as repressed immigrants who could not voice their opinions or wishes in the country which they immigrated to. In the case of poets, words are their means of working and communicating; without words there is no expression of experiences, feelings, anguishes, and, as a result, there is no poetry. According to Billings, in this last line, "di Michele gives us a rare, early glimpse of the [father's] maturity of feeling and capacity to understand and sympathize" that will also be presented in her subsequent works ("Discovering the Sizes of the Heart" 98). Indeed, the father is seen in a superior position in relation to the other family

members as — according to the persona — “he remained ever / king of our idylls” (17-18).

This quiet father turns into a very critical one in “Sunday Dinner.” In this poem, the father calls his daughter “a failure.” The same lips of the previous poem now demonstrate a “compressed / disappointment” (4-6). The daughter does not fight back, as will be seen in more comments in the next chapter of this study, so, the father continues to criticize her as he “plays the ventriloquist” (26). His behavior is seen by Holmes as a response to “the daughter’s harsh silence [that] actually undercuts her father’s authority more deeply than verbal arguments ever could” (180). In response to her father’s behavior, the daughter meditates that “[s]ome things will not be swallowed” (31) demonstrating the gap which has been already created between father and daughter. This language barrier between father and daughter is also presented in “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath. In this poem, the persona confesses her hatred for the father when she says: “I never could talk to you / The tongue is stuck in my jaw” (24-25). The father-daughter relationship in di Michele’s poem is seen in a similar perspective as the one in Plath’s poem since both fathers are authoritarian and the daughters feel inferior in relation to them.

According to Corrado Federici, in *The Gravity of Mary di Michele’s Poetry*, *Bread and Chocolate* distinctively present “a relationship of dominance and subservience between the sexes” (9). The six poems selected from this collection to be analyzed here portray daughters (most of them young girls) and their relationship with their fathers. The father portrayed in “Bread and Chocolate” has a good relationship with his daughter since “[s]he does not need to do anything / but smile for her father;” and for the girl, “her father is the god / of bread and chocolate” (10-13). While in “Casa Mia” the father was presented as a “king” of the children’s idylls (18), in “Bread and Chocolate,” he is a “god” who demonstrates affection contrasting with all resentful feelings that are presented in subsequent poems.

In “1952,” a photograph of the persona’s father and mother is described. According to Holmes, “photography becomes a way to suggest that no eye is ever innocent; that is, vision is never pure but is always *re*-presentation marked by cultural expectations and desires” (185). This statement is confirmed when the persona describes her father as “handsome” in the picture, “a valentino and a dancer” (20). She also confesses her admiration for his figure in the photograph in the following lines that characterize a positive childhood experience:

I loved him because he taught me how to tango,
 because he gave me long days to play with other children,
 and evenings sitting in his lap and many toys, the spinning
 tops and rides on the merry-go-round (21-24).

On top of that, for the persona, her father and mother are “[a] most ordinary couple / looking perfectly beautiful” (28-29) and the father is portrayed as having a satisfied look for having a “woman beside him” (26) which will contrast with the father of other poems, such as Vito, in “Mimosa.” The lines above confirm Holmes’s statement that, in this poem, the father is depicted as “beneficent and mild” (185).

In “Waiting for Babbo,” the word *babbo* alludes to the poet’s Italian heritage since *babbo* corresponds to the charismatic form of daddy. This poem depicts what in Portuguese can be translated into one single word: *saudade*. The persona’s father goes abroad and for this child the experience of losing a dear one — “I lost my father for the first time / to the sea, to america” (3-4) — is not a good one. This is a recreation of di Michele’s own experience since her father had to go to Canada one year before the rest of his family’s immigration. The persona compares the ideas of time passing for a young girl and her father; saying that things for her are harder:

I am four, a year to you *babbo*,
 is twenty to me, twenty years
 and I am five, I have grown old
 without you (...) (11-14).

The persona misses her father and for her, the time passing is a cruel experience. This contrasts with the experience of the persona of “The Old Pontiac” in which the daughter enjoys a ride with her father and shares this moment with no one else except for her infant brother:

My brother is crawling all over the hood
 of the car, my father doesn’t care,
 he is leaning against the car,
 grinning, proud, dressed in a suit.
 I’m beside him, just looking,
 but my mother is not there,
 she’s still busy stuffing a lunch in the kitchen (7-13).

The admiration for the father expressed through the use of positive adjectives in the description and the absence of the figure of the mother

in the car demonstrates the closeness in the relationship between father and daughter. In addition, this poem also points out that the mother — as in a traditional patriarchal family — has assumed her submissive place in the kitchen.

In “Ave,” the reader senses that time has passed and the childish admiration for the father is now more mature since the father is portrayed as having “[t]he intelligence of hands / without books” (1-2), expressing that he probably had no or few access to formal education but is a wise person in his daughter’s opinion. The father of this poem has a “daughter / with a university education” in contrast to his own lack of formal education, which might be considered to cause a distance in the father-daughter relationship (21-22). In addition, this father keeps a wish that is common in traditional patriarchal families, “the desire for grandchildren” (30).

“How to Kill Your Father,” first published in *Bread and Chocolate* and later republished in *Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New* does not follow a conventional timeline, but the flow of memory. It starts with a father breaking “a promise on the road to Firenze” and the persona (his daughter) observing that she will not “speak to him all through / the drive in the Tuscan hills” (1-3). This seems a childish behavior of not talking to someone when angry with him and contrasts with the persona in “The Old Pontiac” who got along well with her father. Later the persona comments that her North American education has taught her “how to kill a father” (18-19) which is, in this case, metaphorical and explained at the end of the poem when the persona is “walking down an Italian / *via*” (20-21) and overcomes her divergences with her father to the point of reflecting upon their situation in order to:

(...) visit him in the hospital
 where you will be accused
 of wishing his death
 in wanting a life
 for yourself (22-26).

Holmes poses that it is “[n]ever given the cause of the present disagreement, [so] we interpret it to be part of a long standing friction” (186). Some of the causes of the conflict between father and daughter can be interpreted as her having access to formal education, her growing mature and her not accepting the traditional patriarchal Italian rules imposed by her father. Another example of killing the father in literature is depicted in the already mentioned poem “Daddy” by Plath. The

persona in “Daddy” had “always been scared” of her father (41), he had a “brute heart” (50) and was a “bastard” (80), and even “the villagers never liked” him and danced in the occasion of his death (77-78). The daughter struggles with the father’s omnipotence and omnipresence in her memories even after he is dead up to the point of trying to commit suicide in order to release herself from desperation.

Di Michele’s third collection *Mimosa and Other Poems*, contains her most famous poem, “Mimosa,” in which, according to Joseph Pivato (2007), the “Italian-Canadian heritage, family dynamics and a woman’s ambivalence towards patriarchal society” (206) are presented. The poem is divided into three parts, which are entitled: I Mimosa, II Marta’s Monologue, and III Lucia’s Monologue. The first part of the poem is the portrayal of Vito, an Italian-Canadian patriarch, and the second and third parts are the portrayals of his two daughters, Marta, the subservient and Lucia, the rebellious. The first part presents the immigrant Vito who is married to Alma and has two daughters. Vito’s displacement in relation to Canada and his feelings towards his daughters are presented in a third-person perspective. Some details about Vito are also depicted in the other two parts, and will be analyzed later in this chapter.

The poem starts by depicting Vito, “a sad man,” listening to the song *Mimosa* “rocking / in the brighton rocker, in the backyard / of the house he’s earned” while he “savours his banishment” (1-4, 16). There is a feeling of nostalgia of the mother land in the reproduction of an Italian garden recollected by Vito in the form of “zucchini, tomatoes, peppers, tender peas, and Italian / parsley” (30-31). Vito’s cultivation of elements of his culture of origin in the Canadian soil demonstrates him trying to preserve his eating habits and can also be seen as a refusal to buy local products.

The narrator follows by recounting “the difficulties of even the most secure patriarch” (Holmes, 193) when describing Vito’s difficulty to learn English and his necessity to do so, in order to be able to “talk with his children in the language / in which they dream” (35-36). It is said that Vito’s wife — Alma — can not talk in English with their daughters, but although she can not speak this language she is the one who talks with Marta and Lucia, as opposed to Vito, as will be observed in the following chapter. In this poem, the couple’s relationship is different from the one presented in “1952” since, according to Marta, Vito

(...) takes for granted her [the mother’s] loyalty

and would love a divorce and a younger woman.
 He'll never leave her though
 because the family's a landscape
 he doesn't want changed (348-352).

The authoritarian figure represented by Vito is not able to see Alma with much consideration, that is, the wife is dominated and oppressed by him. This lack of consideration is demonstrated in the first part of the poem revealing more about his relationship and the circumstances in which the couple got married:

His good wife, he didn't have to thing about,
 she worked hard and cooked well.
 He might have done other things,
 but he married young, just after the war (...) (60-63)

Vito “never wanted the girls to / grow up” since some “hard times made him stop breathing for himself / and spend it all on his children” (39-40, 64-65). Even though “he has no son” and he considers “his daughters rare and intelligent and full of music / He's not happy, [because] he knows he's getting old” and the way his daughters are leading their lives gives him “little hope of finding his youth in grandchildren / soon enough” (66-68, 71-72). Another aspect that makes him worried is death since “[h]ow can he be happy when he knows / that he'll die sooner than he cares to?” (72-73). This leads him to reflect about his own father who had “the left part of his body paralyzed” and who said in his deathbed that he would have to close only one eye when he died in contrast to Vito “who'll have to close two” (74-78). After the loss of his father “Vito learned to sleep with his eyes open” (79) probably because of the fear of dying.

In the sequence, Vito is brought back to the present and “hold back tears” (3) while listening to the song *Mimosa* which demonstrates he does not want to externalize what he is feeling. Vito remembers

(...) the choice he had to make
 as a poor one: to starve making fireworks
 to celebrate the saint's day, in the family trade,
 working as he had worked as a child,
 bare foot until he was thirteen, with his father,
 and always hungry,
 or to make his way in a new world without mimosa,
 where he didn't have to tip his hat to Don So-and-So

in order to eat or get a job,
 where he hoped a man would be judged by his work
 and paid for his labour (83-93).

Vito did not want the suffering life of his motherland for him and his family; therefore he went to a promising land in search of better job opportunities. For him, Italy and Canada represented two very different cultures in relation to job opportunities. In Italy he worked in small family business or with bosses he did not want to be submissive to. Therefore, Vito criticizes his country of origin for being so provincial. On the other hand, in Canada, which he considered to be a more developed place, he believed he would be acknowledged and respected for his work. Since Vito had a family to support and Italy did not give him good job opportunities, he was subjected to a “forced dispersal” – theme discussed by Ricardo Sternberg in “Roots and Writing”¹ – by immigrating to Canada, a country in which he believed he would be able to financially improve the life of his family.

The end of the first part of “Mimosa” contrasts the kind of lifestyle Vito achieved by immigrating to Canada to his frustration about what his daughters have turned into:

The good life gave him a house and money
 in the bank and a retirement plan,
 but it didn't give him fruitful daughters,
 his favourite makes herself scarce
 and the other looks like her mother (94-98).

Vito had put all his effort to bring his family to this promising land and had to suffer the consequences of immigration. The main consequence for him, which he is reflecting upon while in a rocking chair savoring Mimosa, was the influence this immigration had on his children's upbringing, which will be one depicted in the second and third part of “Mimosa” and will be one of the themes presented in the next chapters.

¹ Unpublished essay. Access generously consented by the author.

CHAPTER 3
TO BE LIKE THE MOTHER OR TO BE A *PUTANE*?
ACCEPTANCE AND REBELLION IN THE
PORTRAYALS OF DISPLACED DAUGHTERS

My purpose in this chapter is to analyze some poems by Mary di Michele in which the daughters are portrayed. For this reason, I will keep on analyzing poems by di Michele's first three collections: *Tree of August*, *Bread and Chocolate*, and *Mimosa and Other Poems*. In this chapter, the discussion will be about the daughters and their family relationships, especially with their fathers, taking into account their attitudes towards their upbringing in traditional patriarchal families. I will depart from the analysis of the portrayals of young daughters to the analysis of adult daughters in order to comprehend their position of sustaining or abandoning their Italian traditions in a new land, a consequence of the clash caused by displacement. Finally, this chapter will introduce the familial and cultural experiences these daughters had in their childhood and adolescence in order to develop their life choices as adults which will be the focus of chapter four.

Di Michele's first collection — *Tree of August* — as commented on the previous chapter, presents a very critical father in "Sunday Dinner." The daughter portrayed in this poem is so oppressed by the statement of the father who calls her "a failure" (4) that she can not say a word. A possible explanation to the behavior of the daughter is detailed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* when she analyzes the formative years. De Beauvoir states that "if her father shows affection for his daughter, she feels that her existence is magnificently justified; she is endowed with all the merits that others have to acquire with difficulty; she is fulfilled and deified" (287); which is not the case of the persona of this poem. The daughter's option of fighting back with silence is a consequence of the father's attitudes since according to de Beauvoir "if the father's love is withheld, she may ever after feel herself guilty and condemned; or she may look elsewhere for a valuation of herself and become indifferent to her father or even hostile" (287). The gap which is starting to be delineated between father and daughter is translated in the daughter's attitudes. She looks down into what is placed on the table, meditating on the napkin which lies in her lap, the words she intend to say bite her tongue and she can not find comfort in her mother since the "mother's eyes are turning to salt" (24). As stated by de Beauvoir, in such families, "the father's wishes come first" (287), therefore, this poem represents "no communion dinner" (1) since the

father is the only one with voice because it is he who aggressively discusses about his daughter being a failure while the mother turns her eyes from the dialogue perhaps afraid of expressing her opinions. In this circumstance, the daughter “fails to make connections, / to communicate” (11-12) since she does not express her opinions and does not fight back her father’s verbal insults, keeping her thoughts to herself. However, she might be respecting her father in this moment by not arguing with him, but when she says that “[s]ome things will not be swallowed” (31) she is indicating that she might revolt against his authority one day.

Contradicting this pattern of oppression, the daughters of “Bread and Chocolate” and of “1952” — both poems from the collection *Bread and Chocolate* — as observed in the previous chapter, are fulfilled with the affection they receive from their fathers. Their satisfaction with the paternal figure appears in the form of smiles, praises, and remembrances of childhood memories. In “Waiting for Babbo,” another poem discussed in the previous chapter, the experience of losing a father to another continent is sad, which indicates the persona is unsatisfied with the physical absence of the father, having no regrets or indifference towards him. The experience she goes through is that of missing him and not of hating him. Once again a portrayal of admiration is depicted in “The Old Pontiac” since the daughter’s existence is fulfilled with the company of her father. Even though they do not interact through words, they share the same admiration, both father and daughter “like the car” (14) in which they ride in the countryside, emphasizing the closeness of their relationship. This affirmation is possible because, as stated in the previous chapter, only the father and children are together, excluding the mother who is cooking in the kitchen. More specifically, father and daughter have a closer relationship because while the persona’s “brother is crawling all over the hood / of the car” (7-8) the persona is standing in a privileged position which she confirms when she says that

I’m beside him, just looking,
but my mother is not there,
she’s still busy stuffing a lunch in the kitchen. (11-13)

In this collection, it is in “Ave” that the detachment between father and daughter starts to be established. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the difference in the education of father and daughter creates a gap between both, even though, at this moment, this difference

is still perceived with admiration through the use of the word “intelligent” (1) to characterize the father’s hands. Most strikingly is the conflict portrayed in “How to Kill Your Father” — first published in *Bread and Chocolate* and analyzed here in the version from *Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New* — which is similar to the one portrayed in “Sunday Dinner” analyzed previously in this chapter. Likewise in this poem, the daughter does not speak with her father due to his attitude of breaking a promise. She abandons the car to wonder alone reflecting about her surrounding, the weather, and her American education:

You abandon the car and walk
 Into a Roman afternoon.
 You know how to kill your father,
 he knows how to kill you.

The sky is waving white cloud
 kerchiefs to wipe away your tears,
 to offer a truce, if not the truth
 in the family. In the intensifying heat
 even the wind begins to wilt, its wings
 of feather and wax melting.

You are alone on the highway to the sun.
 Your North American education
 has taught you how to kill a father
 but you are walking down an Italian

via, so you will surrender (7-21)

The persona surrenders to this “Italian *via*”, which represents a suggestion of family bounds despite conflicts. Probably, the memories of their homeland might make her change her feelings and attitudes towards him. This surrender makes possible for the persona to “visit him [the father] in the hospital” where she is treated with hostility through the accusation of “wishing his death / in wanting a life” for herself (24-26).

The last poem of *Bread and Chocolate* to be analyzed here is “The Disgrace” — later republished in *Stranger in You* — which portrays a displaced young girl in an Italian traditional family meeting in which children are in the yard, women are in the kitchen, and men are in the living room. She does not belong to the sphere of childhood

anymore since she is having her first menstruation and is starting to be introduced to and marginalized in the sphere of women adulthood:

(...) Curled up with cramps in the corner,
I am one among the snails climbing the wall
by the stove, the stew pot heating below,
trying to sip chamomile tea, with a blanket
wrapped around my middle to ease the first

labour of blood.
[.....]

I am marking this first day of my first
bleeding in red pencil in my work book.
(...) I am only ten years old
but my family is already plotting a different
and disquieting role for me (14-19, 69-70, 77-79).

In gender terms, this girl is experiencing a position of in-betweenness since she is not allowed to participate in the men's talk but also does not accept to be taking part in the ladies' stories:

(...) My mother and aunts
serve the unwritten stories of their lives
which they wipe away without pause
to reflect on the crumbs on the table.
[.....]

The ladies, *le signore*, are ready to repeat
stories as my mother offers coffee and cake.
[.....]

The men are in another room drinking grappa, smoking
cigarettes, while the soccer game roars from the TV.

Through the open doorway I can barely see
the shadows of the men's heads (19-22, 36-37, 82-85).

According to Ken Norris (1991), this poem shows "the girl's fear of being consumed, not by women, but by the kitchen, by the female role, by a sense of gender which is both socially determined and limiting" (4). She reproduces this fear when she meditates if her "initiation into the confessional of the kitchen" will stop her thinking (80-81). The

persona's behavior demonstrates her belief that the women's conversation is frivolous and her rejection of the patriarchal presupposition that girls should get along with women and not disturb men's world. As a consequence, this poem can be considered an example of what Holmes calls di Michele's dedication "to challenging patriarchal normativeness and universalizing" (168) since even though she maintains her physical position in the kitchen, she is maturely able to recognize that the men in the other room "tell similar stories as the women / but as authorities, not as gossips" (93-94).

As observed, the poems selected from *Bread and Chocolate* depict the "the progress from a 'golden child' having her picture taken in a lush Italian garden, to a mature woman whose declaration of independence from her family leaves permanent but necessary scars on everyone involved" (Billings 101). In the first aforementioned poems, the father-daughter experiences are positive in the sense of admiration, especially in the first poems of this collection; meanwhile, in the last two, the experiences are not positive for two different reasons: the daughter hates her father and wants to "kill" him, even if metaphorically, and the daughter does not demonstrate acceptance of the patriarchal division of women's sphere from men's sphere.

After observing mostly portrayals of young daughters and their appraisals of their father, I would like to focus the analysis on portrayals of Marta and Lucia, the two adult daughters depicted in dramatic monologues in the poem "Mimosa," from *Mimosa and Other Poems*. In this poem the differences in the portrayals of young daughters, previously presented, are depicted in the portrayals of two opposing daughters: Marta, the subservient daughter, and Lucia, the rebellious one. As commented in chapter two, the poem has three parts of which the first one was analyzed previously, remaining the other two. Each part can be considered one dramatic monologue according to Robert Scholes' definition of the term: "a single speaker addresses remarks to one or more listeners at some significant moment in the speaker's life" (1340). In most of the time the sisters talk about each other and their relationship with their family. Marta spends most of her monologue criticizing Lucia, while Lucia uses her monologue to try to defend herself from her sister's and family's criticism.

Part II, entitled Marta's Monologue, is the longest section of this poem. It presents Marta's description of herself and the choices she has made to her life, Marta's personal accounts about her sister Lucia and how she feels about it, and also Marta's relationship with her family. Part III, entitled Lucia's Monologue, displays Lucia talking

about her choices and her feelings towards the figure of her parents. These two parts depict the two contradictory female identities of Marta and Lucia. In the one hand, Marta's efforts to preserve the family traditional values while repressing her inner self. On the other hand, Lucia's wishes and fights against the norms, morality, values and traditions by trying to discover who she is in order to create a life of her own. According to Billings, "these two monologues should not be construed as strictly autobiographical. The viewpoint in 'Marta's Monologue' is, in fact, an amalgamation of the perceptions of di Michele and two other women, one Italian, the other Anglo-Saxon" (*Contemporary* 115).

The second part of the poem depicts Marta whose "loyalty to her family is, on the surface, untarnished" (Billings 105). Marta is the daughter who plays the traditional female role, since throughout her life she "tried to please" her father (99) reflecting de Beauvoir's statement reproduced above related to the father's wishes. Marta might be considered the perfect daughter according to what is expected in a traditional patriarchal family since she is still living with her parents, she has a job as school teacher, but especially, she

[...] know[s] enough to risk nothing,
to live where it's safe,
to have a job that's secure,
to love those who love me, my parents,
and to offer the proper respect to our relatives (104-108).

In other words, Marta performs the role she is required by society and especially by her family while, at the same time, she has to split with her sister who does not show the same respect for their family. This splitting creates between the two sisters a barrier which is translated in the way Marta describes Lucia:

My eldest sister, Lucia, is not like me,
she's not good. She's the first born,
the stubborn one, who wears Italia
like a cheap necklace around her throat,
with a charm that makes her heart green
with tarnish, Lucia, the poet
who talks about us in obscure verses
nobody reads for sure,
Lucia, who claims that someone in the family,
her twin, committed suicide, but it's not true

she has no twin, I'm the second born
and a full year younger than she is (114-125).

This introduction of Lucia designed by Marta already reveals that the two sisters do not go along well. By comparing Lucia to herself, saying “she’s not good” Marta already establishes who, in her point of view, the adequate daughter of the family is. In terms of culture, Marta points out that Lucia does not respect their traditions when she says Lucia wears Italia as a “cheap necklace” (117). Regarding the killing of a twin it might be interpreted as the metaphorical killing of someone’s characteristics one wants to abandon. Also, this may be read ironically if considering the twin’s “suicide” in terms of Marta’s excessive respect for traditions, without pursuing a life of her own.

According to Bonato (1994), the sisters are “two symbolic personae” compared to biblical characters: “Like the Virgin Mary and the prostitute, Mary Magdalene, these two sisters represent opposite poles of values and behaviour, with Marta being the traditional, virtuous daughter, while Lucia is the rebellious daughter” (28) as can be observed here:

Lucia is *putane* because she doesn’t live at home
[...]
and the family is ashamed of that gypsy
daughter, the bohemian, the cuckoo’s
egg in our nest (126, 132-134).

These lines combined with the last lines of the first part of “Mimosa” were what inspired the title of this chapter. This duality of accepting and being repressed by the Italian traditions versus subverting and abandoning them is what creates this split in the portrayals of the daughters. Returning to Marta’s characterization of Lucia, she even uses swear words to diminish her sister’s character which might be read as jealousy, achieving the point of wishing her own sister’s death: “Sometimes we wish she were dead. / Sometimes we wish she were married” (135-136). This “we” should not be taken as the final truth because Marta is assuming she can voice her family’s wishes when she can only talk from her own perspective. However, as Marta is voicing it, it is possible to analyze that she can not decide what could be the worst future for her sister: death or marriage.

As the monologue follows, Marta then stops complaining about her sister and starts praising her own qualities:

At every family gathering
 I pull out the accordion.
 I play like a full orchestra
 overtures by Verdi and Rossini,
 the music he [Vito] loves,
 the music I've learned by heart
 as an act of love (137-143).

Although Marta is the devoted daughter, she is not the “favorite” one as stated in Vito’s last lines (96-98) discussed in the previous chapter. This feeling of inferiority can be related to what Federici denominates the metaphor of “non-existence;” it occurs “when woman refuses to or is incapable of performing the exacting role assigned to her” leading to the diminishing of her “sense of being” (10). In Marta’s case, she is incapable of performing the role of a traditional Italian daughter without feeling resentful of her sister’s lifestyle: “I was the one who resented the fact / that she was not punished, but rewarded, / for doing whatever she wanted to do” (185-187).

The way Marta and Lucia perceive love is also different. In Marta’s point-of-view,

Lucia has other notions about love.
 About love she says she’s an expert.
 [...]
 Lucia says that love is a labyrinth:
 [...]
 you are searching for the one you think you love
 through passages that lead nowhere
 but back into the self (177-178, 188, 198-200).

Marta states that what she “really think[s] about love is all mixed up” with things she learned in “religion class at school” (201 -203). Their views are opposites in the sense that Marta believes in God and family while Lucia believes that “a person’s relationship with God / had more to do with the way you love yourself” (215-216). Therefore, for Lucia, love is something one can find inside oneself and not in the relationship with a deity or a religion. Marta proceeds on ironically contrasting her undervaluation in relation to Lucia. Lucia is the one who “would have her prayers answered, / (whatever she really wanted she seemed to get)” while Marta says that her prayers “were like conversations on a pay telephone, / He [Jesus] never rang back” (225-226, 230-231).

Besides all we have seen about Marta so far, she tries to convince that she is “not ambitious” (275). She tries to excuse herself saying she does not want a life in which a woman has

(...) got a perfect right
to do nothing
to paint her nails
to bake a cake,
and to wait for a man (288-292).

However, after all we have read about her, it is hard to believe that she does not want this kind of life for her own, the life of reproducing the traditions of patriarchal Italian families, more specifically, the tradition of marrying, having children and settling down as what happened with her mother Alma. Bonato (2007) argues that the mother, Alma, does not have an opportunity to speak for herself in “Mimosa” even though she represents an active role in the family as a mediator between daughters and father. However, this role can be seen as submissive to her husband according to the tradition of patriarchal families. Bonato also proposes that Alma is voiceless due to the fact that she does not speak English. However, she points out that Alma is important in their family once she shares with her daughters secrets of womanhood from a hard life as an Italian immigrant, as perceived in the following excerpt from Marta’s monologue:

But I learn most about being a woman
from watching my mother, Alma.
I learn from her how a woman is made for love
and for cleaning the house.
She is very fat with eating pasta and the insults
of my father who takes for granted her loyalty
and would love a divorce and a younger woman (343-349).

It is the figure of the mother who is responsible for drawing the landscape of the house. As seen in the previous chapter, the father does not feel comfortable with a change in his family and Marta is responsible for holding things together. It is after remembering moments of their childhood that Marta confesses: “there was a time when I wanted to be like Lucia” (372). As portrayed in Marta’s monologue, it is Lucia who gains all the attention, it is about Lucia that the father thinks, and it is Lucia who has all the prayers answered. These remarks make clear that Marta is envious of Lucia, due to the fact that Marta thinks she

does not receive enough attention, what was mentioned previously about the necessary amount of affection in the formative years according to de Beauvoir. It is stated in the last lines of the first part of “Mimosa” that Marta is not her father’s favorite and, as can be seen in the excerpt below, Marta has suffered a lot for not being acknowledged:

I only want my fair share.
 I only want what’s mine and what Lucia kicks over.
 I want my father to stop mooning about her
 and listen to my rendition of Mimosa (393-396).

The duality Marta-Lucia in their personal monologues portrays two opposite female identities through confessional impulse. In the interview with Ken Norris, di Michele said that since she is “a former Catholic and practiced in the art of confession,” she knows that “often what’s most interesting is what you didn’t actually do” (9). Then, taking di Michele’s comment into consideration, the most important aspect of Marta in her monologue is not who she is, but who Lucia is, because Lucia did things Marta did not have the courage to do, such as breaking the patriarchal rules. In other words, what is important for Marta is to talk badly about Lucia because Lucia stands for Marta’s repressed self.

Lucia starts the third part of “Mimosa”, her own monologue, by acknowledging the efforts done by her parents in order to raise her and her sister. However, she also points out that they need to let her live freely, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

So much of my life has been wasted feeling guilty
 about disappointing my father and mother.
 It makes me doubt myself.
 It’s impossible to live my life that way.
 I know they’ve made their sacrifices,
 they tell me so often enough,
 how they gave up their lives,
 and now they need to live their lives through me.
 If I give it to them, it won’t make them young again,
 it’ll only make me fail along with them (397-406).

Lucia is the one who acknowledges that her parents have to live a life of their own now and that she “is unable to submit to the patriarchal family structure” (Billings 105).

Most of the time I can’t even talk to my father.

I talk to mother and she tells him what she thinks
 he can stand to hear.
 She's always been the mediator of our quarrels.
 He's always been the man and the judge (409-413).

According to Bonato (1994), daughters of Italian ethnic heritage, like Lucia here, “find traditional roles for women, especially as represented by their mothers, to be restrictive and incompatible with contemporary ideas of Canadian motherhood or feminist conceptions of womanhood” (4). Therefore, while the mother is submissive to the patriarchal system, the daughter, Lucia, recognizes the oppression and refuses to take part in the humiliating system. According to Billings, the moment in which Lucia exposes her beliefs about womanhood to Marta is when “di Michele is creating a variation of feminism: the feminism not of the middle-class North American, but of the first-generation immigrant daughter trying to throw off the shackles of traditional family duty” (106). It is for not tolerating these oppressions anymore that Lucia leaves her parents’ house and Marta considers her a “*putane* because she doesn’t live at home” (126).

Lucia demonstrates to comprehend what the future represents if she stays under the influence of her father’s orders. This is the reason why she does not tolerate such oppression of the patriarchal system and breaks with the patriarchal traditions of her Italian family. According to Bonato (1994), “although the daughters ultimately reject the female roles that tradition dictates, they do not completely disassociate themselves from their mothers and their traditional culture” (7). But even not disrespecting their mother and keeping the traditions, at least as memories, this behavior is considered rebellious by Lucia’s family and illustrates Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2005) affirmation since, according to her, “the future depends upon the breaking of paradigms, depends upon the combination of two or more cultures” (my translation, 707). Lucia rebelled against the patriarchal paradigms and took her part to create new possibilities for her future. “*Mimosa*” depicts this “combination of two or more cultures” when trying to conciliate the original culture of the father — Italian — with the culture of the country he and his family have immigrated to — Canadian. This combination of the two cultures has to coexist with the clash of patriarchal traditions to which the two generations are exposed to: the father and his expectations about his daughters’ future and, the daughters and their expectations for their own lives.

By the end of her monologue Lucia depicts her father by rephrasing some lines of the beginning of the poem: “More than a tired man, my father is such a lonely, / disappointed man” (454-455). Lucia proceeds by exposing the difficulties of her father’s life:

He has learned through many years of keeping his mouth
shut
to say nothing,
but he still keeps thinking about
everything (456-460).

Lucia talks about her father in a tone of respect and opens up space for Vito’s voice. Vito complains about the interests of the younger generation in opposition to the opportunities he had:

I’m a worker and I didn’t go to school,
but I would like to be an educated man,
to think great thoughts, to write them,
and to have someone listen.
You younger generation don’t care about anything in the
past,
about your parents,
the sacrifices they have made for you (467-474).

Vito praises Lucia’s poems but reminds her that he knows her (479, 487), that “the truth is not nice, / the truth is that his life is almost over / and we [father and daughter] don’t have a common language anymore” (488-490). The tone of the father’s confession of the importance of them being together is interrupted by Lucia’s childish comment that “He has lost a tooth in the middle of his upper plate, / the gap makes him seem boyish and very vulnerable. / It also makes me ashamed” (491-493).

Lucia is considered by Vito his “luckless offspring” (9), who has not pleased him like Marta, who has fled away instead of living with the family, and who has broken many family traditions. In opposition to the end of “Mimosa” in a tone of confession of Lucia’s similarities with her father and her feelings towards him. She is able to acknowledge her mistakes and to demonstrate their physical similarities, desires, and love for each other in the country from which they came from and could not live anymore.

I have his face, his eyes, his hands,
his anxious desire to know everything,

to think, to write everything,
his anxious desire to be heard,
and we love each other and say nothing,
we love each other in that country
we couldn't live in (498-504).

By pointing out their similarities Lucia brings the two of them together intending to diminish the barrier that was built between the two of them when they immigrated from Italy to Canada. This intention of breaking barriers is a major change from the silence portrayed in "Sunday Dinner" or the conflict in "How to Kill your Father" to end in a mutual love they have to rediscover respecting the gap between the two generations, the culture of the new country to which both need to adapt and, at the same time, in which they have the hard task of cultivating their culture of origin.

CHAPTER 4

DAUGHTERS WHO GROW UP TO DISCOVER THE MILLIONTH PART DIFFERENT IN THEMSELVES

In this chapter I will analyze some poems by Mary di Michele presenting how gender and cultural questions of the daughters' upbringing influence their life choices, especially their choices of partners. For this reason, I selected poems from the collections *Tree of August*, *Bread and Chocolate*, *Mimosa and Other Poems*, *Necessary Sugar*, and *Immune to Gravity* (republished in *Stranger in You*) in which expectations and relationships are portrayed. Drawing from the analysis in chapters two and three, the purpose here is to discuss how the daughters' life choices reflect the experiences they had in their childhood and adolescence and how they, as mature women, live with these choices.

Still on the issue of the doubleness in the portrayal of daughters, "First Communion" — published in *Tree of August* — portrays the characteristics of two daughters: Tricia and Rita. Marta and Lucia in "Mimosa," Tricia and Rita are presented as two very different sisters. Tricia is "shy" (18) while Rita has "quick steps" (20). Tricia is more introspective since she "stands back in the shade / raising melancholy, praying hands" (34-35) whereas Rita is more interested in the knowledge she can gather from the world such as knowledge about sex, which Rita gets from watching animals (25-26). In this case, not receiving proper information about sex leads Rita to use her observatory power in the world to get the information she wants. De Beauvoir described a similar case when she wrote about a young girl who, not receiving the necessary information about sex, had to learn about it relying on friends' accounts, on seeing an excited dog, a horse urinating, flies and animals copulating, among others (325-326).

The title of "1001 Nights" recalls the myth of the stories and folk tales also known as *Arabian Nights* in which a king (Shahryar), who believes all women are unfaithful, is famous for condemning to execution a succession of women. Eventually, Scheherazade, one of the chosen women, manages to get Shahryar's attention by each night starting to tell him a story to be only finished in the subsequent night. By doing this, Scheherazade keeps him interested in the stories and succeeds in keeping herself alive (Cláudio Giordano 2009).

The poem, also from *Tree of August*, is ironic since it demonstrates the persona's ability — as Scheherazade's ability — of telling stories, in this case the story of her incipient relationship. It starts

by detailing a first encounter full of expectations. The persona hopes to “find a friend” in the stranger whose hand she is about to shake (2-4). However, to the persona’s surprise “the man vanishes in the gesture / like a Cheshire cat from its smile” (5-6) in a reference to the Cheshire cat from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* who disappears at the moments Alice most needs his advices.

The second stanza portrays a second encounter – which does not occur – rich of images, as can be observed in the excerpt below:

The second night you unwrap
 like a stale sandwich found
 in last summer’s picnic basket,
 you turn the key
 to your apartment
 to his absence,
 a mummy sheathed in cellophane.
 It’s so dark you must flick a switch
 to make the stars catch fire
 in your ice-box room. (7-17)

The persona provides the details as if she was telling one of Scheherazade’s story. She is alone in the apartment, intimidated by the solitude and darkness of the place, static and lifeless as a mummy. The apartment is emblematic of the coldness of the moment. The persona has to “make the stars catch fire” in which the stars can be interpreted as one of the symbols that represent love, and the lighting of the stars’ fire hints that the persona is supposed to make the effort to the successful of the relationship.

The third stanza gives the sensation that the persona is getting used to her boredom routine:

Every night you sit at a desk
 to tell the story of yourself
 to yourself. While the city unwinds
 unwinds its own tales (18-21).

In this routine, the persona tells the story to herself because her listener is absent. At this same time, the city is still producing its own stories. The poem continues to depict a feeling of loneliness through images of nature in which the persona says one “can hear / a tree’s heart beating / in love / in the wind’s arms” (22-25) demonstrating that the realization of love is only possible through the observance of nature. In the last two

line, the persona refuses the experience of love: “[y]ou can play a record or something / when you don’t want to listen” (29-30). Listening to her own stories and not having anyone with whom to share them, leads the persona to frustration. Therefore, “1001 Nights” depicts this never ending sensation that even if the persona had 1001 nights of dates she would not be happy in a relationship if she did not open herself to it.

“Dark Nature,” in *Bread and Chocolate*, portrays a daughter reflecting on her parents’ relationship. In the beginning of the poem, the persona depicts the man her “mother didn’t marry / the tall blond from a northern province / friend of a friend of her father” (2-4), referring then to the attempt of an arranged marriage. The stanza ends with the persona criticizing her grandfather for treating her mother’s vows as if she were “like a pretty pawn in a petty dynasty” (7). The second stanza opens up describing the personality of the persona’s mother. The persona states her “mother had a stubborn brunette nature” and that at the age of fifteen “she wanted to skip rope forever” (8-9) indicating the mother’s wish to postpone her entering in adulthood while girls like her could, according to patriarchal precepts, be concerned with “attain[ing] the whole dignity of a person and gain[ing] her full rights (...) [by] wear[ing] a wedding ring” (de Beauvoir 431).

The next two stanzas portray the persona’s mother as a young woman full of life who “wanted to sneak to the festa in the evening” and “to slip back through innocent windows” (10-11). And the stanza ends with the statement that the persona’s mother “wanted no men who was not her father” (12) indicating her desire to remain under the patriarch’s surveillance although defying his plans of arranging a marriage for her. The third stanza depicts the mother of the persona preparing a meal against her own will since “she could not love” her father’s guests (13-16). The fourth stanza starts with the persona’s grandfather trying to break the resistance of his daughter “with a stick, with a belt, with a fast, with imprisonment in her room” (17), and all of these attempts did not succeed since “her childish heart kept skipping rope by day / and deviating by moonlight to the wood” (19-20). This stanza ends with the resolution of the persona’s mother problems since “a war saved her with more hunger and no more father” (22).

In the fifth stanza, to the persona’s mother’s relief, with the end of the war “come peace, come repairs to the broken-hearted village, / come the many strangers / with their hunted looks and lips just retrained to smiling” (25-27). To her happiness “among them was a young electrician, / with the blackest hair and eyes of old Roman brandy / who found in my mother the darkest rose of love imaginable” (28-30). The

poem closes with the couple's realization of love by conceiving of a child.

They married quickly and conceived a blond daughter
out of a dream of war and wheat and heaven
who grew up to think all men
must be dark to be handsome (31-34).

The persona's mother has to fit the duty of the young wife described by de Beauvoir: "[t]o love her husband and to be happy is a duty [which] she owes to herself and to society; it is what her family expects of her" (462). De Beauvoir states that if a woman goes against her parents' wishes — in the case of this poem, the persona's mother contradicted her parents' choice of partner — she has found "a way of showing them how wrong they were" (462).

Regarding women's freedom to make their own choices, as stated in the previous chapter, in "Mimosa," Marta considers her sister a *putane* because Lucia opts for having "other notions about love" (177). Lucia said she "learned to be a woman in the arms of a man," which, in my point-of-view, is a criticism on her sister who learned "it from ads for lipstick" or from watching herself in the mirror (438-440). This criticism was endorsed previously in the poem by Marta's confession:

Friday night when I'm going nowhere
and I'm alone, I play with my kohl
eye pencils and become Cleopatra.
(...)
I paint my eyes like a cat's so that I can look at myself
in nine different ways (...) (329-331, 335-336).

Both daughters have learned about love from their mother. Marta remembers her mother telling her that "a woman's always naked without her lipstick" and has learned mostly "about being a woman / from watching" her "mother, Alma" (306-307, 343-344). She learned "from her how a woman is made for love and for cleaning the house" (345-346). This subservient role had been criticized by de Beauvoir since, according to her, "woman's work within the home gives her no autonomy; it is not directly useful to society, it does not open out on the future, it produces nothing" (456). On the other hand, Lucia has a more realistic perception of life than her sister. Lucia learned about love from watching her mother while she waited for their father "hand and foot" (442). Lucia seems to be aware and runs away from what de Beauvoir

calls “marriage as a ‘career’” (482) since she enjoys the company of men, but does not demonstrate desperation for commitment. De Beauvoir also states that “it has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always annihilates women” (477) so Lucia wanting to “discover a different” life possibility, free of what her future might be if she stayed under her father’s patriarchal dominium “abandoned him to live in an apartment on her / own” (69-70)

Lucia says she is different from Marta since her sister has learned about love from “scorching novels on the best sellers lists” (443) and goes on discussing the differences between the two of them when she states that:

I didn’t think I could be Anna Karenina or Camille,
I didn’t think I could be Madame Bovary or Joan of Arc,
I didn’t think that there was a myth I could wear
like a cloak of invisibility
to disguise my lack of knowledge (444-448).

By making reference to these prominent historical and fictional women, Lucia is doubting Marta’s capacity of being herself, of having her own personality while hiding her true self under a cloak. This “lack of knowledge” is not problematic if Marta intends to get married, since, according to de Beauvoir, the husband “is to have no hesitation in keeping his wife uncultured, weak, and stupid solely to safeguard his honor” (435). Lucia has chosen to broadly show her life options and to contradict her family’s patriarchal rules, while Marta opted for hiding her Cleopatra’s fantasies keeping patriarchal and Italian traditions. Marta might be able to hide this secret from the rest of their family and community but being so repressed does not make her happy as Lucia; on the contrary, it only makes her envy of her sister (372).

“Mimosa” also portrays the idea of walking on safe ground while looking for the father’s characteristics in the men a girl wants for herself. However, as it is Lucia who is addressing this issue, she shows rebellion regarding this fact:

I have stopped looking for my father in other men.
I have stopped living with the blonde child that he loved
too well.
Now I’m looking for the man with the hands of a musician,
with hands that can make wood sing,
with the bare, splintered hands of a carpenter.
I want no auto mechanics, with hands blind with grease

and the joints of a machine.
 I want no engineers in my life,
 no architects of cages.
 I want to be with the welders of bridges
 and the rivers whose needs inspired them (426-437).

Lucia refuses the role models of men since she is not looking for engineers, even though, she expects a man to be artistically sophisticated, such as a musician. Her expectations relate to her lifestyle outside of the traditional patriarchal Italian community in the sense that she is not looking for her father's characteristics in other men and that she wants freedom to choose who she pleases no matter his social status. According to de Beauvoir, "[m]arriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being" (425), however, marrying does not seem to be Lucia's concern. She fits most adequately in de Beauvoir classification of the "celibate women" who are either "frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution" (425).

"The Story of a Marrying Man" is one of the poems published in the second part of *Mimosa and Other Poems*. According to Holmes, it "captivate[s] us through an often bitter analysis of women's lives crushed by subservient domesticity" (198). It depicts a girl who "always wanted to be loved / and to get away from her mother" (19-20) confirming de Beauvoir's statement previously presented that "most women (...) plan to be, or suffer from not being" married (425), being marriage a "career" which, according to the author, should be prohibited for women (482). The poem also illustrates Casey Miller's and Kate Swift's (1991) remarks that "women are perceived as sexual beings who occasionally think, men as rational beings for whom procreational sex is a duty and recreational sex a source of relief from the burdens of running the world" (114) since the poem depicts a man that when "bored with sex" find his "time to marry and raise a family" (34-35).

The role of the submissive women is played by the new wife who was "trained by the mother-in-law" to become "an acceptable wife" so that "when he whistled [to call her] / she never barked" (58-61). The new wife is compared to the mother since in terms of efficiency and competence in the following excerpt:

He had to whistle for his wife
 but never for his mother,

his mamma never needed to be told,
 the thing was done
 even before he could think to want it. (46-50)

The example given by the mother-in-law and her “training” her daughter-in-law demonstrates that “woman’s task [is] to assure the happiness of the family group” (de Beauvoir 449).

Trained by her mother-in-law
 she became an acceptable wife
 so when he whistled
 she never barked,
 she came running with her sleeves rolled up,
 her hot face dusted with flour. (58-64)

When marrying, de Beauvoir criticizes women for assuming two functions, the first of satisfying the “male’s sexual needs” and, the second, of taking “care of his household” (427). In this case, the wife learns to obey the husband’s whistles and to stop whatever she is doing (even if it is important) at any time. Not surprisingly, the dreaming girl’s destiny is to complete the cycle expected by a married woman: to have children. As a consequence, “[t]he natural growth of the family made her big / with babies like apples” and, so, “she slipped into the role of mother she feared” (64-65, 67).

Still in *Mimosa and Other Poems*, “White Lies” depicts the end of a marriage by revealing the husband’s destiny from the first line: “He died before he could leave her” (1). Then, returning a bit in time, it is told that a husband was ready to pick up his wife from work. The wife is surprised by the husband’s attitude since “he kissed her deeply / as she entered the car / for the last time / so they planned” (9-12), in other words, she was astonished with him because this would be the last moment they would be together as a couple before their divorce. While he is taking a drink, he dies because “something in him that had been wound / too tightly, like the delicate mechanism of a watch, / snapped” (15-17).

The third stanza presents their previous agreement to divorce amicably because of their “maturity of dormant passion” (22). The wife, on the other side, does not fight back since she knows “how tiresome / the argument of her too familiar body” is (28-29). De Beauvoir states that soon a wife “learns that her erotic attractiveness is the weakest of her weapons; it disappears with familiarity” (468), which appears to be

the case in this poem. They have been married for “twenty years” sharing “breadcrumbs and love” and accumulating “a stock of white / lies” (32-35). With the husband’s death there was no more husband’s “lust” and the wife “could afford her freedom” (38-39).

In *Necessary Sugar*, “Bloody Marys” portrays a mature woman in a very uncomfortable situation. This woman meets her husband for drinks; however, awkwardly, the ‘so-called husband’ acts more like an ex-husband or that the couple lives an open-relationship. I propose it for two reasons. First, the husband seems distant from the woman of the poem when she mentions “the daughter he donated / from his sperm” (2-3). That might mean that they had a child together and he abandoned both mother and child either financially or emotionally, or both. This abandonment of this possible family illustrates de Beauvoir’s remark that a “man is socially an independent and complete individual” (426). The second reason for considering him an ex-husband or someone with whom the persona has an open relationship is because the man mentions a “woman who’ll sing / in his bed tonight” (4-5). The description of the meeting he is soon going to have with this woman can be read as a metaphor of a sexual relationship in which the woman performs oral sex with “his instrument,” in other words, his sexual organ:

he tells you how her throat is adorned
with white camellias,
how she moves with his instrument
like a line of jazz,
totally improvised, always exciting (6-10).

He acts cruelly with the persona when describing the sexual creativity of his future meeting; however, the persona of the poem is “never less / than civilized woman” which can be contrasted to the liberal and creative woman the man is looking for. The persona, who is constricted to normative patterns, asks the name of this other woman naturally, the same way she would “order another Bloody Mary” (11-13), in this case, the drink is more like a poison she does not want to swallow. She tries to act in a way that was expected from her; contrastively, the situation is so uncomfortable that even the place where she is sitting in is criticized for being “built to be seen, / the prickly pear of your sex / chafing” (15-17). While the woman tries to discover how to deal with this uncomfortable situation, for the man, their conversation occurs in a very natural way confirming de Beauvoir’s statement that “no young man considers marriage as his fundamental project” (431).

The last poem to be analyzed in this chapter is “Life is Theater or O To Be Italian Drinking Capuccino on Bloor Street At Bersani & Carlevale’s,” first published in *Immune to Gravity* and analyzed here in the version from *Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New*. In this poem, a woman savors coffee while remembering issues of her childhood and adolescence, most of them relating to her feeling culturally displaced. She starts by describing her frustration with the language she couldn’t share with her friends (3-5). Even for her meals, she “needed an illustrated dictionary” in order to translate the name of the dishes to them. Then, she reflects on her upbringing by listing various cultural stereotypes, for instance, the fact she went to a “largely Jewish highschool” in contrast to her being a “Catholic” (22-23). She considers herself as having no importance in this environment and even feels bad for not having the same social status as her colleagues since “among doctor’s daughters,” she is “the child of a truck driver for la Chiquita banana” (23-24). The prejudicial names continue as she “became known as Miraculous Mary, / announced along with jokes about virgin mothers” to being considered “as popular as pork on Passover” (25-27), noticing that Passover is a Jewish Celebration and that Jews do not eat pork, therefore, she was not popular at all, noticing that both of them represent a reduction of cultures (Catholicism and Judaism). Summing up, the persona has language problems to make herself understood in the simple act of sharing a meal and, throughout her life she has suffered from being from a different culture and religion.

Then, the young girl starts to grow and passes through “insomnia, migraine headaches, / menstruation” considering it “the betrayal of the female / self to the species” (28-30). She is “afraid of that millionth part different” (32) in herself indicating that becoming a grown-up woman is not an easy process. The girl wanted “to be like everybody else,” the desire of adolescents of being accepted by the group, what she “wanted was to be liked” (36-37). In the sequence, she experiences her first love disillusion when she felt “in love with that Polish boy / with yellow hair everybody thought / looked like Paul Newman” (38-40). The problem was that “all the girls wanted to marry him” and “there was no much hope for / a fat girl with good grades” (41-43). The poem goes back to the present time and this girl, now a grown-up woman, is “sitting in an Italian cafe / with a man” (44-45). She has dated him “a few times and fondled / fondly until the romance went as flat as the froth” of a cappuccino (46-47) and now is indifferent to their relationship since she “shift[s] easily into the never- / theless doubtful relationship of coffee to conversation” (50-51).

The last stanza of the poem contrasts two cultural stereotypes: the Oscar, representing Hollywood, and an Italian opera. While films are meant to a more popular and broaden audience, the opera is meant to a more classical and sophisticated group. The partner who is with the persona at the cafe makes a ridiculous comment mocking the persona's tradition, to which the persona answers by leaving him the bill to pay:

Being in love with someone who doesn't love you
is like being nominated for an Oscar and losing,
a truly great performance gone to waste.
Still you balanced your espresso expertly
throughout a heated speech without spilling a single
tear into the drink, after which you left him to pay the bill.
For you, Italians! he ran out shouting after you,
life is theatre! (56-63)

FINAL REMARKS

My admiration for Mary di Michele's work started in the undergraduate program at UFSC, in a course by professor Dr. Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, my current advisor, entitled "Multiculturalism and Contemporary Canadian Poetry." At that moment, through the reading of some of di Michele's poems, I was amazed to realize the poet's ability to show that "it is important that the woman's point of view be heard, that women stop being silent and speak out against the violence of a patriarchal society"². For this reason, this study is significant to me because it gave me the opportunity to work on the analysis of poems through a feminist point of view at the same time that I was able to observe features of cultural displacement in di Michele's poetry. Therefore, carrying out this study helped me to start satisfying my interests as a researcher concerned with the areas of feminism and cultural studies.

The objective of this masters' thesis was to present an analysis of di Michele's poems which portray the role of fathers and daughters in traditional patriarchal Italian families observing how cultural displacement causes a clash in socio-cultural traditions, such as patriarchy. Poems which depict dilemmas of diaspora and other kinds of displacement that both di Michele's father and daughters had to face when immigrating from Italy to Canada. It was not easy for either father or daughters to overcome what Kamboureli calls the "process of acculturation or integration" (13). Besides having to learn the language of the country they have moved into — a process that according to Kaplan does not happen "without emotional consequences" (63) — both father and daughters had to surrender to a culture to which they were not opened to.

The process of learning the language and culture of the country to which they immigrated can be considered their way to find their place in the world—of trying to learn how to live in the hyphen (Wah 56, 72-73). The "desire for eventual return" (Clifford 247) is translated in savoring the recollections of their homeland in the form of cultural and linguistic echoes of songs such as "Mimosa," of places like "an Italian via," of an Italian garden in the form of "zucchini, tomatoes, peppers, tender peas, and Italian / parsley," affectionate ways to address someone such as "babbo," among other forms of expressing *saudade*.

² Mary di Michele, in an interview to Joseph Pivato in 1984, page 196 (republished in *Mary di Michele: Essays on Her Works*)

This living in the borderlands (Anzaldúa 216) is not easy for both generations who try to live with the burden of a rich historical-cultural past since Italian traditions do not suit the Canadian context in which they live. This process is hard for the father who was used to the Italian culture and does not accept the imposition of the Canadian culture but seems to be even harder for the daughters who are looking for their self-definition in the middle in their transition from childhood to womanhood.

Regarding my first hypothesis, the father in di Michele's poems analyzed here is portrayed in an oppressive and authoritarian way which allows him to practice the traditions of a patriarchal society of emotional oppression. However, this kind of behavior does not lead to the father's happiness, relief from tiredness, nor satisfaction in relation to his daughters' choice, as in the case of Vito, for example.

Revisiting my second hypothesis, the daughters are portrayed in a position of acceptance and repression or in a position of subversion which was observed, for example, in the analysis of Marta's and Lucia's portrayals, respectively. The position of accepting and being repressed by the patriarch's wishes is associated with keeping the Italian traditions, while, on the other hand, the subversive position relates to abandoning these traditions starting by eliminating the boundaries between the daughters and her families. Besides overcoming traumas of a patriarchal father, the rebellious daughter also has to learn how to live and love a submissive and silent mother. Unfortunately, some women depicted in di Michele's poems are, as Bennett states, not "innocent of collusion with patriarchy" since mothers like Alma and daughters like Marta express their support to the patriarch's interest, are still imprisoned to housework (in the case of Alma), accept underpaid jobs (in the case of Marta as a teacher) and, on top of all that, "have raised their daughters and sons to conform to it" (56).

Reviewing my third hypothesis, the sustaining or abandoning Italian traditions in a new land is a consequence of the clash caused by displacement and is strictly correlated to how authoritarian the father is and how repressed or eager to subvert the norms the daughters are. Submitting to the patriarchal rules does not assure happiness for neither father nor daughters. Vito is not happy to realize that Lucia "makes herself scarce" while Marta "looks like her mother" ("Mimosa" 97-98) at the same time in which Marta is disappointed for not receiving the attention she deserves and Lucia feels she has wasted much of her life "feeling guilty / about disappointing" her "father and mother" (391-398).

Finally, working out my fourth hypothesis, the daughter's life choices, especially their choices of partners, reflect the cultural experiences they had in their childhood and adolescence. This criticism of family and marriage conditions is due to them feeling uncomfortable with the partners they have chosen and either live unhappily submissive as slaves to their husbands, as in "The Story of a Marrying Man," or end up living their lives alone, as in "White Lies," "Bloody Marys," and "Life is a Theater."

As observed in the analysis of the poems, they present dilemmas of cultural in-betweenness in the portrayal of the father's displacement in relation to not being in their homeland anymore and not adapting yet to the Canadian culture. In addition, they depict the father's feeling of discomfort with the behavior of his rebellious daughter upon whom he seeks to impose the traditions of a traditional patriarchal Italian family. Moreover, the poems portray an almost invisible mother, the traditional example of a mother in a patriarchal family, the one who was there only to please her husband, raise their children, and keep herself busy in the kitchen as in "Casa Mia," "The Old Pontiac," and "The Disgrace."

The poems analyzed here also portray family gatherings which depict family memories of the past in Italy and the life of traditional patriarchal Italian families in a new land. The experiences of the families portrayed by di Michele in her poems resemble experiences of other Italian immigrants who came to the "new world" in search of a better life for themselves and their future generations. The difficulties experienced by immigrants and their consequent living in-between two different cultures are portrayed in the figure of the father who is trying to learn a new language and living with the pressures of the new culture while at the same time he has to face his daughter defying his traditions.

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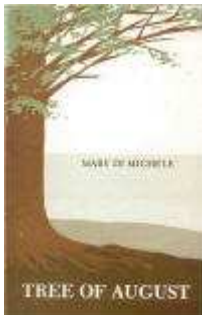
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APPENDIXES



TREE OF AUGUST (1978)

CASA MIA

I

So our skies were like ripe yellow silk
and our home was the deep breathing womb
where we played and offered our scraped knees
to the salt of despotic kisses.

II

First Mamma's voice from the kitchen
hot and heavy,
like the steaming cauldron,

and then the perpetually
awkward silence of the indolent
lips of our Father,
poet without a word,
now deep into the purple
wine of our supper.

Though he had hammered all heroic
impulse into the primal domestic
quarrel of dust,
he remained ever
king of our idylls.

[.....] (1-18)

FIRST COMMUNION

[.....]

Mother watches the dance
of Tricia's shy round
and Rita's lean
quick steps whirling
like the hoards of black or bluebottle
flies gathering
in the yard for the noon's
high mass.

Rita knows all about sex
from herding pigs and chickens
and that everything remains the same
after the first communion.
She spits, squeezes barbed wire legs
Her shoes walk off,
she prods her bare toes
into the pungent, fertilized soil.

Her sister's white lace beauty
stands back in the shade
raising melancholy, praying hands,
fingers blown in glass.

Village bells toll the angelus
under a clockwork sky. (17-38)

SUNDAY DINNER

No communion dinner,
the lamb is rare,
swimming in its own blood.

Father calls me a failure,
his lips compressed
disappointment call me
a failure and the fork

in my fingers, a bifurcated
root and a woman, my intelligence
a failure to make connections,
to communicate.

So I say NOTHING.
I look into the eyes of the potato
on my plate, cold as stone and dumb
and say NOTHING.

The bitch lurks under the table.
The napkin lies in my lap,
the dirty little napkin lies
sometimes stops my mouth
like words I hold back,
words that bite my tongue,
double-pronged.

My mother's eyes are turning to salt.
My lips are redwood.
Father plays the ventriloquist.

I remember how the eucharist
used to stick the roof
of my mouth, a gummy wafer
I had to peel back with my tongue.

Some things will not be swallowed. (1-31)

1001 NIGHTS

The first night you encounter
like the open hand of a stranger
which you are about to shake,
about to find a friend,
but the man vanishes in the gesture
like a Cheshire cat from its smile.

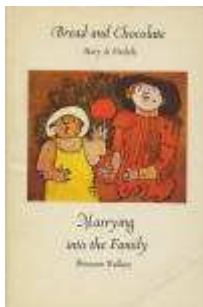
The second night you unwrap
like a stale sandwich found

in last summer's picnic basket,
you turn the key
to your apartment
to his absence,
a mummy sheathed in cellophane.
It's so dark you must flick a switch
to make the stars catch fire
in your ice-box room.

Every night you sit at a desk
to tell the story of yourself
to yourself. While the city unwinds
unwinds its own tales.

If you try, you can hear
a tree's beating
in love
in the wind's arms.
Somewhere the bread of dreams
is served. Teeth grind
it out on a stone mill.

You can play a record or something
when you don't want to listen. (1-30)



BREAD AND CHOCOLATE (1980)

BREAD AND CHOCOLATE

Flowers of marble, flowers of flesh,
unfurl their petals in the ether
of a garden in its second millennium.

A golden child sits on the lawn,
her legs stiffly apart like a doll's,
one arm impulsively thrusting forward a rose
to the watching eye of the camera,
the next second forgetting the observer in her nose's
delicious search for nectar in the bud.

She does not need to do anything
but smile for her father,
her father is the god
of bread and chocolate.

[.....] (1-13)

1952

Streetcar tracks running for years
into the cobbled way of the photograph
give a perspective, a certain depth,
like the grave of early morning light.

A mining town near the German border of Belgium,
the coal of that day has been consumed

but the picture still draws in shades of grey ash

the leisure of my mother and father together.
 She is twenty-six, he is twenty-eight,
 a migrant worker and his wife of five years.

Her look is as blind or beautiful as the corolla of some exotic
 flower, demure or discouraged her head droops forward,
 while her hair is pinned back, in petals sweeping away from her face
 of rose cyclamen. Her belly is forcing her coat open
 with the bulging crown of another life.

Her lips are making their own language
 because he doesn't speak Flemish or French.
 Still long her dark hair in thick curls
 is foreign to the aura of blond light.
 My father is handsome here, a valentino and a dancer,

I loved him because he taught me how to tango,
 because he gave me long days to play with other children,
 and evenings sitting in his lap and many toys, the
 spinning
 tops and rides on the merry-go-round.

And how satisfied he looks to have a woman beside him,
 she has not yet cut herself out of the picture,
 he embraces the bicycle.

A most ordinary couple
 looking perfectly beautiful
 in a kind of happiness in the past
 relieved by the stark lines of streetcar tracks
 in a European city,

and the day carrying a son in its hip pocket
 and two black lungs folded neatly into a wallet,
 and tomorrow,
 my adult fingers like born again hands exposing
 silent lives by a reading lamp. (1-37)

WAITING FOR BABBO

The year was a chasm gaping.
 I lost some heart in that darkness.
 I lost my father for the first time
 to the sea, to america.

The year is a desert canyon
 stretching beyond the arid horizon
 where the dust dreams of breathing
 through gills in water.
 I dream of seeing my father in the wide
 black and white screens of america.

I am four, a year to you *babbo*,
 is twenty to me, twenty years
 and I am five, I have grown old
 without you (...)

[.....] (1-14)
 THE OLD PONTIAC

And the sunshine didn't cost anything,
 but a day could be bought and sold,
 and it took a lot of Saturdays for my father to pay
 for some wheels, a used Pontiac,
 then Sundays we rode for free
 in the country for cows and ice cream.

My brother is crawling all over the hood
 of the car, my father doesn't care,
 he is leaning against the car,
 grinning, proud, dressed in a suit.
 I'm beside him, just looking,
 but my mother is not there,
 she's still busy stuffing a lunch in the kitchen.

We all like the car.
 It is something new.
 It is more than a toy.
 It is something that takes our life

seriously and puts it in the bank.
 The Indian profile of the great chief,
 the insignia on the grille
 means that the car is American. (1-21)

AVE

The intelligence of hands
 without books,
 made thin by famine, war,
 sleeping in the hay of concentration camps,
 eating hay,
 the Germans raging
 as the Americans ran up Italia's calf,
 your father planted his body like seeds,
 parts here and there on Antonella's roof
 found a week after the funeral
 that buried the soul of a man in a single thigh
 for the last day's rising,

Hands made plump by pasta
 and the keen appetite of Canadian
 winter,

working hands,
 made coarse by detergents,
 calloused with the friction
 of assembling the wiry parts of small
 appliances, the fiction
 of prosperity, the car, the bungalow, the daughter
 with a university education,
 the dream packaged in the potato factory, frozen,
 the chocolate factory, stale, the
 home scrubbed to shining, mortgaged,
 dressed in marigolds and pink asters,

the intelligence of hands,
 the sharpeyed needle darning the drapes
 that robe a pink future on the western horizon,
 the desire for grandchildren, a prayer,

smoking in the flames of votary candles,
 snuffed before an indifferent Madonna,
 a hope like the geraniums potted in the window
 which refuse to flower,
 offering only brown buds to the light,

[.....] (1-35)

ENIGMATICO

[.....]
 and she cries out caught
 with one bare foot in a village in the Abruzzi,
 the other busy with cramped English speaking toes in
 Toronto,
 she strides the Atlantic spread
 like a Colossus.

[.....] (14-18)

DARK NATURE

Somewhere there is that other father,
 the man my mother didn't marry,
 the tall blond from a northern province
 friend of a friend of her father.
 Such good friends they became, exchanging vows,
 father and expectant lover,
 treating her like a pretty pawn in a petty dynasty.

My mother had a stubborn brunette nature.
 Fifteen, she wanted to skip rope forever,
 she wanted to sneak to the festa in the evening,
 she wanted to slip back through innocent windows,
 she wanted no men who was not her father.

She made a blood pudding after wringing the neck
 of their plumpest chicken.
 She fried it in pieces in a pan over the fire,
 she fed the guest she could not love.

With a stick, with a belt, with a fast, with imprisonment in her room
her father tried to break her round-shouldered resistance.
Her childish heart kept skipping rope by day
and deviating by moonlight to the wood.
She grew longer and thinner than her father's supper-hour shadow.
until a war saved her with more hunger and no more father.
He died in the embrace of a blond German bomb
that made chopped liver of his will.

Come peace, come repairs to the broken-hearted village,
come the many strangers
with their hunted looks and lips just retrained to smiling.
Among them was a young electrician
with the blackest hair and eyes of old Roman brandy
who found in my mother the darkest rose of love imaginable.
They married quickly and conceived a blond daughter
out of a dream of war and wheat and heaven
who grew up to think all men
must be dark to be handsome. (1-34)



MIMOSA AND OTHER POEMS (1981)

MIMOSA

I. Mimosa

Even more than a tired man, Vito is a sad man,
 all Sunday afternoon finds him rocking
 in the brighton rocker, in the backyard
 of the house he's earned, under the sky he's created
 of green fiberglass, jutting from the roof.
 There is only one heaven, the heaven of home.
 There was only one paradise, the garden
 that kept them little children even as adults,
 until one angel, Lucia, his luckless offspring
 fell, refusing to share in his light.

Sentimental music is being sucked up
 from the stereo system in the basement
 like a sweet gaseous pop
 through a straw.

He listens to an Italian tenor sing Mimosa
 and savours his banishment
 with a ginger nostalgia,
 ginger ale fizzing in a glass by is side.

Summer's finished.

The few roses left are such a dark red
 you imagine the odour of menstrual blood.
 There's a walk of broken tiles through the well trimmed
 grass
 leading to a vegetable patch, fenced and carefully tended,

a nursery for deep purple eggplant, whose mature passions
keep them close to the security of the ground,
garlic, the most eloquent of the plants,
with the grace of a lily, from white clusters of buds,
the flower, is sticking out a long green tongue.
Zucchini, tomatoes, peppers, tender peas, and Italian
parsley,
the season yields.

He tries to improve the English he learned in classes
for new Canadians by reading the daily papers.
Unlike his wife, he can talk to his children in the
in which they dream, but he keeps that tongue
in his pocket like a poorly cut key to a summer residence.
He keeps his love for them like old clothes, in a trunk,
he no longer wears in public. He never wanted the girls to
grow up.
He wants Lucia to be three again and sleeping in his arms.

A small shack stands in the northwest corner of the garden,
his latest project, a hut for storing seeds and tools,
and now there's nothing left to build,
a lifetime of development, of homes under construction,
there's nothing left to be done,
the man's hands are idle and have found time to brood.

The years spent working in a stone quarry just outside
Toronto
taught him how to find the fault in rock
how to split it so that it could be used to build
a face of pink and white limestone for an old house
of red tar and plaster.
It didn't tell him much about the fault lines in his life:
the overtime and the extra Saturdays, the few hours left
frittered away asleep in front of the television,
accounted for a distance he didn't bargain for,
the estrangement like a border crossing
between himself and his children.
His good wife, he didn't have to think about,
she worked hard and cooked well.
He might have done other things,

but he married young, just after the war,
and hard times made him stop breathing for himself
and spend it all on his children.

He has no son but his daughters are rare and intelligent
and full of music.

He's not happy, he knows he's getting old
and Lucia abandoned him to live in an apartment on her
own.

He has little hope of finding his youth in grandchildren
soon enough. How can he be happy when he knows
that he'll die sooner than he cares to?

He still remembers his own father,
the left side of his body paralyzed
from a heart attack and how he died saying:
"I'll only have to close one eye when I die,
poor you, who'll have to close two."

After that Vito learned to sleep with his eyes open.

The voice of the Italian tenor is wailing
about mimosa and the moon which is American.

Vito listens and holds back tears.

He can remember the choice he had to make
as poor one: to starve making fireworks
to celebrate the saints' days, in the family trade,
working as he had worked as a child,
bare foot until he was thirteen, with his father,
and always hungry,

or to make his way in a new world without mimosa,
where he didn't have to tip his hat to Don So-and-So
in order to eat or get a job,
where he hoped a man would be judged by his work and paid for his
labour.

The good life gave him a house and money
in the bank and a retirement plan,
but it didn't give him fruitful daughters,
his favourite makes herself scarce
and the other look likes her mother.

[.....]

II. Marta's Monologue

All my life I've tried to please my father.
 I live at home, teach school around the corner
 at St. Mary's. I make a good salary
 and help children to learn to read and write.
 I have very little experience, that's true
 but I know enough to risk nothing,
 to live where it's safe,
 to have a job that's secure,
 to love those who love me, my parents,
 and to offer the proper respect to our relatives.
 so that when my uncles gather with my father around the
 table
 I listen carefully to all their bull shit
 as they split *lupine* and throw the shells
 into the bowl I don't fail to provide for them.

My eldest sister, Lucia, is not like me,
 she's not good. She's the first born,
 the stubborn one, who wears Italia
 like a cheap necklace around her throat,
 with a charm that makes her heart green
 with tarnish, Lucia, the poet
 who talks about us in obscure verses
 nobody reads for sure,
 Lucia, who claims that someone in the family,
 her twin, committed suicide, but it's not true
 she has no twin, I'm the second born
 and a full year younger than she is.
 Lucia is *putane* because she doesn't live at home
 and because she won't say hello
 or pretend to like uncle Joe
 whom she calls a macho pig.
 Secretly I know she has nothing to say
 even though she pretends to write
 and the family is ashamed of that gypsy
 daughter, the bohemian, the cuckoo's
 egg in our nest.
 Sometimes we wish she were dead.
 Sometimes we wish she were married.

At every family gathering
 I pull out the accordion.
 I play like a full orchestra
 overtures by Verdi and Rossini,
 the music he loves,
 the music I've learned by heart
 as an act of love.

[.....]

Lucia has other notions about love.
 About love she says she's an expert.
 I don't know when she adopted the sacred heart
 of eros, Five years after she left the church,
 she was still a miracle worker or sorts.
 I could never understand how she had the visions
 and I had the faith,
 except that she was the prodigal daughter
 and I was the one who resented the fact
 that she was not punished, but rewarded,
 for doing whatever she wanted to do.

Lucia says that love is a labyrinth:
 [...]
 you are searching for the one you think you love
 through passages that lead nowhere
 but back into the self.

What I really thing about love is all mixed up
 in my head with what I remember being taught as a child
 in religion class at school, the lessons I parrot today
 to another generation of squirming innocents.

[.....]

She was an artist and therefore a narcissist
 and believed, when she believed in anything at all
 that a person's relationship with God
 had more to do with the way you love yourself.
 Yet we would pray in church,

light candles, and for her they flared,
 for me they smoked. I couldn't understand it.
 We were ten and eleven years old,
 and she would talk about the old gods
 as if they were related and equal,
 mythology and religion,
 a pagan temple and a catholic church,
 and she would have her prayers answered,
 (whatever she really wanted she seemed to get)
 while my prayers, addressed properly to Jesus,
 to God, the Father, in His name,
 by which He was bound to answer,
 were like conversations on a pay phone,
 He never rang back.

[.....]

I'm not ambitious
 I find my art in the accordion
 that entertains uncle Joe,
 that makes my father hum
 and my mother proud at weddings,
 I always play and I don't mind,
 in fact, I enjoy it, but more when Lucia's not there
 with her sulking face and rude
 staccato laughter,
 with that you're wasting yourself look,
 half pity, more contempt.

But when a woman's life is so worthless,
 I think she's got a perfect right
 to do nothing
 to paint her nails
 to bake a cake,
 and to wait for a man
 to buy her shoes,
 so that she can go walking with him
 on a Sunday afternoon
 eating ice cream.
 Not that I'm waiting for one,
 but I like to be with friends

and to exchange tips on the latest
lipstick. I wear it thick and red,
the same shade I remember mother wearing.

Lucia and I would play when she wasn't looking
and paint big mouths with her rouge no. 5,
our lips quivering like blue gas flames
with excitement, as we prepared to be women.
A woman's always naked without her lipstick,
I remember mother saying.

[.....]

Friday night when I'm going nowhere
and I'm alone, I play with my kohl
eye pencils and become Cleopatra.
Friday night and I know what it means to enter
a room with the sparkling white heart
of a refrigerator.
I paint my eyes like a cat's so that I can look at myself
in nine different ways,
Friday night and I watch the late show to learn
the Hollywood way to the nirvana of a stunning face
and celluloid figure
which tells me more about being female
than the poetry of Emily Dickinson
or the epistles of Saint Paul.

But I learn most about being a woman
from watching my mother, Alma.
I learn from her how a woman is made for love
and for cleaning the house.
She's very fat with eating pasta and the insults
of my father who takes for granted her loyalty
and would love a divorce and a younger woman.
He'll never leave her though
because the family's a landscape
he doesn't want changed.

[.....]

I confess there was a time when I wanted to be like Lucia,
 when I thought her incredibly wise,
 when I thought it courage that made her leave home
 and generosity that made her experiment with love.

[.....

I only want my fair share.
 I only want what's mine and what Lucia kicks over.
 I want my father to stop mooning about her
 and listen to my rendition of Mimosa.

III. Lucia's Monologue

So much of my life has been wasted feeling guilty
 about disappointing my father and mother.
 It makes me doubt myself.
 It's impossible to live my life that way.
 I know they've made their sacrifices,
 they tell me so often enough,
 how they gave up their lives,
 and now they need to live their lives through me.
 If I give it to them, it won't make them young again,
 it'll only make me fail along with them,
 fail to discover a different, if mutant, possibility,
 succeed only in perpetuating a species of despair.

Most of the time I can't even talk to my father.
 I talk to mother and she tells him what she thinks
 he can stand to hear.
 She's always been the mediator of our quarrels.
 He's always been the man and the judge.

[.....

I have stopped looking for my father in other men.
 I have stopped living with the blonde child that he loved
 too well.
 Now I'm looking for the man with the hands of a musician,
 with hands that can make wood sing,
 with the bare, splintered hands of a carpenter.

I want no auto mechanics, with hands blind with grease
and the joints of a machine.
I want no engineers in my life,
no architects of cages.
I want to be with the welders of bridges
and the rivers whose needs inspired them.

I learned to be a woman in the arms of a man,
I didn't learn it from ads for lipstick
or watching myself in the mirror.
I learned more about love from watching my mother
wait on my father hand and foot
than from scorching novels on the best sellers lists.
I didn't think I could be Anna Karenina or Camille,
I didn't think I could be Madame Bovary or Joan of Arc,
I didn't think that there was a myth I could wear
like a cloak of invisibility
to disguise my lack of knowledge.

The sky is wearing his snow boots already.
I have to settle things with my father before the year is
dead. It's about time we tried talking
person to person.

More than a tired man, my father is such a lonely,
disappointed man.
He has learned through many years of keeping his mouth
shut
to say nothing,
but he still keeps thinking about
everything.

"If I had the language like you," he says to me,
"I would write poems too about what I think.
You younger generation aren't interested in history.
If you want people to listen to you
you got to tell them something new,
you got to know something about history to do that.
I'm a worker and I didn't go to school,
but I would like to be an educated man,
to think great thoughts, to write them,

and to have someone listen.
 You younger generation don't care about anything in the
 past,
 about your parents,
 the sacrifices they have made for you,
 you say: 'What did you do that for,
 we didn't ask you!'
 right,
 is that right?
 These are good poems you have here Lucia,
 but what you think about Italy!
 'a country of dark men full of violence and laughter,
 a country that drives its women to dumb despair.'
 That's not nice what you say,
 you think it's very different here?
 You got to tell the truth when you write,
 like the Bible. I am your father, Lucia,
 remember, I know you."

The truth is not nice,
 the truth is that his life is almost over
 and we don't have a common language any more.
 He has lost a tooth in the middle of his upper plate,
 the gap makes him seem boyish and very vulnerable.
 It also makes me ashamed.

It's only when he's tired like this that he can
 slip off his reserve, the roman stoicism,
 the lips buttoned against pain
 and words of love.

I have his face, his eyes, his hands,
 his anxious desire to know everything,
 to think, to write everything,
 his anxious desire to be heard,
 and we love each other and say nothing,
 we love each other in that country
 we couldn't live in. (1-143, 177-188, 198-204, 213-231, 275-307, 329-
 352, 372-375, 393-413, 426-504)

THE STORY OF A MARRYING MAN

What he really went for were women
with the clean bloneness of white wine,
squeezed from grapes shining with an oily polish,
filmed in the afternoon light,
Chilled for dinner women
Wearing long fitted sleeves of plain cotton
in the full heart of summer.

He had a fondness for untested liquors
for the brew the morning made
for the evening's languor.
He had a few lazy bones
but he could make his way
cutting hair in his own barber shop,
one chair and a Fiat 1500 he drove
the half block to work.

At thirty-five he was almost ripe enough
for a little apricot of a girl
he had picked in the spring.
What she always wanted was to be loved
and to get away from her mother,
what she always wanted was to watch a man snap
like a green kite in a blue breeze
tied to him by the string she jiggled.

A fiance is the moon,
but a husband is its dark side,
and a bride can age into an old woman
in just twenty-eight days
while she waits for his sudden return
after nights playing cards at the cafe bar,
expecting to find her curled up for him
in freshly ironed sheets,
the chaste ribbon of her white gown
tied into a knot.
When a man gets bored with sex,
it's time to marry and raise a family.

Every member of his family agreed
that he made a most excellent husband,
the burden of having his own way
suited him best,
red faced as the china bull,
a souvenir from their wedding
still burdened with the confetti:
candy coated almonds wrapped in puff balls of veil,
that wasted its seeds on the vanity into her scented talc.

He had to whistle for his wife
but never for his mother,
his mamma never needed to be told,
the thing was done
even before he could think to want it.

They all lived tighter by the grace of his mother
in the house her widow's pension kept
and he was the door that went walking
the chickens ran in and out freely,
ignorant of what it means to be respectable
gossiping into the grain.

Trained by her mother-in-law
she became an acceptable wife
so when he whistled
she never barked,
she came running with her sleeves rolled up,
her hot face dusted with flour.

The natural growth of the family made her big
with babies like apples
tucked into her apron pockets.
She slipped into the role of mother she feared
with a touch of bravado
like small breasts into a padded bra. (1-69)

WHITE LIES

He died before he could leave her.
He was prompt to pick her up
as usual,
from her evening shift,
he drove her home,
nothing seemed
unusual.
Perhaps only her mouth was a little surprised
when he kissed her deeply
as she entered the car
for the last time,
so they planned.

But before he could even drink his drink,
an hour from another bed,
something in him that had been wound
too tightly, like the delicate mechanism of a watch,
snapped
and the crystal of his eye
opaqued forever.
Time stopped dead.

They had agreed to separate
with the maturity of dormant passion.
He found a younger woman
for whom he banked all his lust.
She, having paid the dividends
in three children and an unresponsive
skin would let him go,
knowing just how tiresome
the argument of her too familiar body
had become to him, almost internalized,
like the disembodied voice of conscience.

After twenty years of breadcrumbs and love,
sleeping together, contradicting their hearts,
they accumulated a stock of white
lies, the barren kisses of greeting and departure,
the brand names of endearment.

The woman had been saving up her discontent.
She could afford her freedom in the end.
The man had been banking all his lust
and she kept the books,
invoicing her regrets.

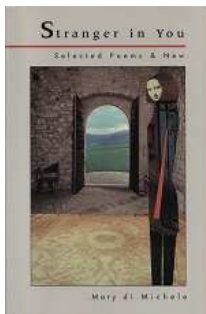
They held a joint account
and a plot of earth for their already
indifferent bones. (1-44)



NECESSARY SUGAR (1984)

BLOODY MARYS

You meet your husband at half-past ten
 for drinks, leaving the daughter he donated
 from his sperm bank with your mother,
 he tells you about the woman who'll sing in his bed tonight,
 he tells you how her throat is adorned
 with white camellias,
 how she moves with his instrument
 like a line of jazz,
 totally improvised, always exciting,
 and because you are never less
 than a civilized woman, you ask her name
 as you order another Bloody Mary
 and shift uncomfortably on furniture
 built to be seen
 the prickly pear of your sex
 chafing. (1-17)



STRANGER IN YOU: SELECTED POEMS AND NEW (1995)

BORN IN AUGUST

(first published in *Tree of August*)

Born in the fifth house
 under the sign of Leo
 on the sixth of August,
 four years after Hiroshima
 180 years after the birth
 of Napoleon Bonaparte,
 born Maria Luisa di Michele,
 baptized at Santa Lucia
 in na ancient town, Lanciano,
 of the single miracle, since the middle
 ages, the host, bleeding for you.
 Born in the wake of World War Two,
 in the green, though scarred, hills of Abruzzo,
 where the Allied guns and the German guns
 rendezvoused. All I knew of this history were family
 anecdotes yet for years I dreamt of low flying
 planes overhead, dropping their exploding cargo.
 Austerlitz, Auschwitz, Hiroshima!
 [.....] (1-18)

HOW TO KILL YOUR FATHER

(first published in *Bread and Chocolate*)

He breaks a promise on the road to Firenze.
 You will not speak to him all through
 the drive in the Tuscan hills,

the rented Alpha Romeo bitches
 but the poplar's got your tongue,
 long and green and aloof.

You abandon the car and walk
 Into a Roman afternoon.
 You know how to kill your father,
 he knows how to kill you.

The sky is waving white cloud
 kerchiefs to wipe away your tears,
 to offer a truce, if not the truth
 in the family. In the intensifying heat
 even the wind begins to wilt, its wings
 of feather and wax melting.

You are alone on the highway to the sun.
 Your North American education
 has taught you how to kill a father
 but you are walking down an Italian

via, so you will surrender
 and visit him in the hospital
 where you will be accused
 of wishing his death
 in wanting a life
 for yourself.

A scorpion's sting darkening
 your heart buries July in Italy. (1-28)

THE DISGRACE

(first published in *Bread and Chocolate*)

[.....]

The old wives and the new wives are
 chattering, the intimate news of an idle
 moment. Their children are blowing
 like seedclocks in the yard, they are

safe for now. The girls are ready to
 fling themselves, rejoicing in spring
 breezes, transported by *splendor*
 in the grass. Some of the boys will surely

jump the fence. On the first day I forget
 to play. Curled up with cramps in the corner,
 I am one among the snails climbing the wall
 by the stove, the stew pot heating below,
 trying to sip chamomile tea, with a blanket
 wrapped around my middle to ease the first

labour of blood. My mother and aunts
 serve the unwritten stories of their lives
 which they wipe away without pause
 to reflect on the crumbs on the table.

[.....]

The ladies, *le signore*, are ready to repeat
 stories as my mother offers coffee and cake.

[.....]

I am marking this first day of my first
 bleeding in red pencil in my work book. (...)
 I like drama. They say I can act but in the choir
 they won't let me sing. I just move my lips,
 my song is silence. I am only ten years old
 but my family is already plotting a different
 and disquieting role for me.

Here is my initiation into the confessional of the kitchen
 (will that stop my thinking?)

The men are in another room drinking grappa, smoking
 cigarettes, while the soccer game roars from the TV.

Through the open doorway I can barely see
 the shadows of the men's heads. They think
 they are creating life in the living-room
 while the dust of the outside world

clings to their shoes, but even men,
 when they are common, men
 of the trades: barber, plumber, electrician,
 who make the real world because they
 construct it, do not write their own stories.
 They tell similar stories as the women
 but as authorities, not as gossips (...) (5-22, 36-37, 69-70, 75-94)

LIFE IS THEATER OR O TO BE ITALIAN DRINKING
 CAPUCCINO ON BLOOR STREET AT BERSANI &
 CARLEVALE'S

(first published in *Immune to Gravity*)

Back then you couldn't have imagined
 yourself openly savouring a cappuccino,
 you were too ashamed that your dinners
 were in a language you couldn't share
 with your friends (...)

[.....]

Educated in a largely Jewish highschool
 you were Catholic. Among doctor's daughters,
 the child of a truck driver for la Chiquita banana.
 You became known as Miraculous Mary,
 announced along with jokes about virgin mothers.

You were as popular as pork on Passover.

You discovered insomnia, migraine headaches,
 menstruation, that betrayal of the female
 self to the species. You discovered despair.
 Only children and the middleaged are consolable.
 You were afraid of that millionth part different
 in yourself which might just be character.
 What you had was rare and seemed to weigh
 you down as if it were composed of plutonium.
 What you wanted was to be like everybody else.
 What you wanted was to be liked.
 You were in love with that Polish boy

with yellow hair everybody thought
looked like Paul Newman.
All the girls wanted to marry him.
There was not much hope for
a fat girl with good grades.

But tonight you are sitting in an Italian café
with a man you dated a few times and fondled
fondly until the romance went as flat as the froth
under the domed plastic lid of a cappuccino ordered
to-go. And because you, at least, are committed
to appearing mature as well as urbane
in public you shift easily into the never-
theless doubtful relationship of coffee to conversation.

He insists he remembers you as vividly
as Joan Crawford upstaging Garbo in *Grand Hotel*,
You're so melodramatic, he said, *Marriage*
to you would be like living in an Italian opera!

Being in love with someone who doesn't love you
is like being nominated for an Oscar and losing,
a truly great performance gone to waste.
Still you balanced your espresso expertly
throughout a heated speech without spilling a single
tear into the drink, after which you left him to pay the bill.
For you, Italians! he ran out shouting after you,
life is theatre! (1-5, 22-63)

OTHER POEMS

DADDY (Sylvia Plath)

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
 You died before I had time---
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
 Ghastly statue with one grey toe
 Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
 Where it pours bean green over blue
 In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
 I used to pray to recover you.
 Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
 Scraped flat by the roller
 Of wars, wars, wars.
 But the name of the town is common.
 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
 So I never could tell where you
 Put your foot, your root,
 I never could talk to you.
 The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,
 I could hardly speak.
 I thought every German was you.
 And the language obscene

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
 Are not very pure or true.
 With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
 And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
 I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
 And your neat mustache
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You---

Not God but a swastika
 So black no sky could squeak through.
 Every woman adores a Fascist,
 The boot in the face, the brute
 Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
 In the picture I have of you,
 A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
 But no less a devil for that, no not
 Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
 I was ten when they buried you.
 At twenty I tried to die
 And get back, back, back to you.
 I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
 And they stuck me together with glue.
 And then I knew what to do.
 I made a model of you,
 A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two---
The vampire who said he was you
and drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat, black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (1-80)