

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Irene Vilar, *Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict*. (New York: Other Press, 2009). 222 pp., \$15.00 paper.**

From its flesh-toned cover etched with red tallies marking the author's fifteen aborted pregnancies, to its unflinching accounts of each procedure, Irene Vilar's *Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict* forces readers to confront the issue of abortion. Though the topic is inevitably divisive, Vilar's purpose, as stated from the prologue of her memoir, is clearly neither didactic nor partisan.

Still, Vilar's story is politically charged. Implicit in the personal narrative of failing to fulfill the role of mother to her fifteen aborted pregnancies is a political narrative in which Vilar challenges the reductive binaries of Western discourse, which are imposed upon the abortion debate and her own story of addiction. "Everything," Vilar writes, "can be explained, justified, our last century tells us. Everything except for the burden of life interrupted that shall die with me" (5).

While this challenge to Western thought is by no means a new contribution to the field of ethnic studies,

Vilar does politicize her narrative in more relevant and relatively unexplored territories, primarily by exhuming the history of the United States' testing of birth control technology and population control policies in her home country of Puerto Rico from 1955 to 1969. In narrating her personal struggle to reconcile this history and, in its wake, synthesize and express her identity as a Puerto Rican *American* woman, Vilar gives voice not only to Latinas, but to immigrant women suspended between, and shaped by, distinct histories, cultures, political ideologies, and experiences of oppression.

Most interesting is Vilar's tracing of her progress as a writer and how this development in language and the academic literary arena is inextricably tied to her process of creating and articulating her identity. The first half of the memoir features consistent references to canonical Western writers—Pascal, Jung, Goethe, Camus, DeMan—whom Vilar studied when she immigrated to the U.S. to attend a university. By anchoring her narrative in the language of writers far removed from her country, history, and experiences, Vilar illustrates her initial subordination to the dominant discourse and its suppression of her ability to assert her identity in a field governed by white males.

Although her struggle to establish her identity through language is common to many immigrant narratives, Vilar further layers her narrative by addressing how being a woman complicates the pursuit of self-expression. Thirty-five years her senior, the husband (and former professor) with whom Vilar had the majority of her fifteen abortions is referred to as "The Master," or the anonymous yet monolithic "he," and emerges as an embodiment of the patriarchal discourse that dictates her self-censorship. She admits that because she "was writing for him" (101), her previous memoirs omitted mention of their abusive relationship and fifteen abortions, thereby revealing the link between the fragmentation of her prior narratives and her splintered identity.

Rather self-reflexively, Vilar acknowledges that necessary to writing *Impossible Motherhood*, she began to claim control over her writing: “For seven years he had taught me plenty of words but somewhere along the way I had learned to distrust most of what came out of my mouth” (126). Not long after this epiphany, Vilar avers her refusal of Simone De Beauvoir’s statement that “[y]our past is the situation you are no longer in.” With this first rejection of Western discourse, Vilar details her long-awaited return to Puerto Rico and, in her descriptions of her homeland, Vilar’s language indicates a tethering of past, present, body, and identity.

It is at this point, too, that the purpose of the memoir’s structure crystallizes. Its sections, untitled and chapterless, allow Vilar to fluidly blend the historical, the literary, and the personal. Though the juxtaposition of certain events feels forced at times—particularly her effort to stress the influence of her political activist grandmother, Lolita Lebrón, who is absent through most of her life and the book—Vilar both echoes and builds upon the works of writers such as Barbara Mellix, ultimately constructing a compelling narrative testifying that writing, especially for ethnic (and gendered) minorities, is a perpetual process of becoming. To that end, Vilar concludes her memoir with a series of hopeful diary entries addressed to her daughter who is still in the womb—the first pregnancy that Vilar did not abort. Here, in embracing a source of life in a story overburdened with loss, Vilar welcomes becoming a mother and her full self—past, present, future: “You are the bond between me and the world I come from,” Vilar writes to her daughter. “You are becoming my origins” (222).

*Jade Hidle*  
*California State University, Long Beach*