The protagonists of contemporary U.S. Latino/a fiction are caught in a bind. On the one hand, they face the pressures of assimilation into mainstream American culture. On the other, they are profoundly enmeshed in families closely tied to their communities of origin. Due to the proximity of the places of provenance—Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico—to New York, Miami, and Los Angeles, the settings for the novels examined in this book, and the persistent use of Spanish both as pure and hybrid marker, families are idealized by protagonists as close to the Latin American or Caribbean “source.” To resolve the predicament, the protagonists in the fictions I examine project desires that are unacceptable in the U.S. mainstream onto their dark doubles—mothers, sisters, wives, sometimes even fathers and brothers—alternate, allegorized, versions of the self. Madness and death are most often the fates of these doubles: this is how the seven U.S. Latino/a authors I examine deal with aspects of the self that are entrenched in a rather more communitarian, undifferentiated way of being in the world.

Doubles (Mad, Black, and Dead)

This book is not an exhaustive study of all contemporary U.S. Latino/a fiction. However, the typology I describe also applies to texts by other U.S. Latino and Latina writers. Although the authors chose English as their language of creative expression, they are all, in different ways, bound to Spanish, be it broken or pure, and bound to a memory or an awareness—sometimes more powerfully to a denial—of the lands of origin. The Puerto Rican Rosario Ferré, the Cuban American Cristina García, the Dominican American Loida Maritza Pérez, the Nuyorican Edward Rivera, and the Chicana Yxta Maya Murray ascribe “dangerous” or unassimilable traits of U.S. Latino/a identity to characters (male and female) who, due to madness, or a violent anger, are better able to both deploy and resist features of U.S. Latino/a identity than their counterparts, the sane protagonists, who behave following more normative standards. In texts by these writers the double is often a dead mother, or is methonymically related to a dead mother, sacrificed by the text for her unassimilable qualities. It is the conventional realist protagonists, however, whose ambivalence generates the doubles that act against them or against the established order. In much
the same way, according to Angus Fletcher’s still definitive study of allegory, the Renaissance allegorical hero generated subcharacters, doubles who opposed, or sided with, him in his struggle. The abundance of textual doubles characterizes both medieval and contemporary U.S. Latino/a allegory. Although I may not be the first critic to notice that many contemporary U.S. Latino/a texts are allegorical, this book is the first in-depth study of the phenomenon.

In the work of two other writers, the dynamic varies. In the short stories of the Dominican American Junot Díaz, persistent triangulation of characters dominates the stories as much as doubling. Díaz’s double character is sometimes a sensitive male who must be sacrificed for the ambivalent triumph of a self-destructive machismo. At other times this sensitive male is the protagonist. When the suffering and/or mad mother appears in these stories, she is quite different from the madwoman in the work of the women writers and of Rivera: In Díaz’s stories she is a woman whom suffering has frozen into almost total passivity and affective withdrawal. In Piri Thomas’s seminal autobiography, Down These Mean Streets, when the black Cuban father denies the son, and the white Puerto Rican mother accept him, the doubles of both parents and of Piri himself proliferate in the text, culminating in the disappearance of a father double that signals Piri’s ultimate ambivalence around issues of fatherhood and race. In the works of both of these chroniclers of street masculinity, the father’s disappearance from the text is more heavily symbolic than the mother’s. Although these fathers are not dead bodies in the stories, their absences affect the street allegories in the same way that the dead mothers haunt the other novels.

Significantly, the sacrificed double is often a black or mixed race character. The angry women in three of the novels by women writers—The Aguero Sisters, Sweet Diamond Dust, and Geographies of Home—are all madwomen of mixed race. They are ultimately expelled from their narratives, either through murder, suicide, or a simple act of renunciation by families who see them as contaminated. The Aguero Sisters starts and ends with the murder of the mother by the father; Gloria, the mulatta, burns down the plantation house in Sweet Diamond Dust, leading us to believe that she too will die in the ensuing conflagration. In Geographies of Home the mad sister, who hates being black, rapes the sister who is comfortable with her blackness, an act of such violence that the “good” mother of the two women is forced to reject the mad daughter she had previously tried to protect, in some way expelling the angry aspect of the self. In Down These Mean Streets the ominous disappearance of a character standing in for the black father signals Piri’s ultimate inability to come to terms with his blackness.

As Marta Caminero Santangelo has noted in The Madwoman Can’t Speak (1998), the paradigm of the angry madwoman may no longer be valid for feminist literature. Caminero Santangelo deftly shows that madness is the result of the refusal to recognize boundaries between the self and the other. Mad characters so driven to the erasure of difference are self-destructive, often rejected by the texts that create them, and ultimately poor models for a feminism emphasizing agency. Caminero Santangelo asserts that the classic model of the madwoman as a feminist symbol is outmoded. For example, in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar had proposed the madwoman as a representation of the suppressed and