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Breaking Motherhood's Rules: Play and Reproduction in Gabriela Wiener's *Nueve lunas* (2009)

Este artículo analiza Nueve lunas *(2009) de la escritora peruana Gabriela Wiener con relación al concepto de juego, tanto en la creación de la novela y la gestación de la protagonista, como en la desarticulación de nociones normativas de la maternidad. Si bien la maternidad es una institución patriarcal llena de preceptos que, como indica Adrienne Rich, no hacen sino oprimir a las mujeres que son y no son madres, también puede ser lugar de (una posible) resistencia. Argumento cómo por medio del juego* Nueve lunas *distancia la maternidad de los procesos naturales y expone su carácter construido, restituyendo al proceso de gestación independencia y autonomía.*

Palabras clave: *maternidad, juego, reproducción, procreación, embarazo*

This article analyses Nine Moons *(2009), by the Peruvian writer Gabriela Wiener, in relation to the concept of play in the creation of the novel, the development of the protagonist as a mother, as well as the dismantling of normative notions of motherhood. Although motherhood as a patriarchal institution is, according to Adrienne Rich, full of norms that oppress women, whether they are mothers or not, it can also be a site of (possible) resistance. I argue how through play* Nine Moons *separates motherhood from natural processes and exposes its constructed quality, restoring independence and autonomy to the process of gestation.*

Keywords: *motherhood, play, game, reproduction, procreation, pregnancy*

All play means something.
—Johan Huizinga

Since at least the publication of Johan Huizinga's seminal study *Homo Ludens* in 1938, cultural historians have understood the value of play in everyday life. From childhood, people learn basic social norms, gender roles, and acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, through play. According to

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, any field in which we participate in the social world is characterized by strategies that are "the product of the practical sense as the feel for the game … a feel which is acquired in childhood, by taking part in social activities … and doubtless … in children's games" (*Other* 62-63). As British psychologist Donald Winnicott underlines in *Playing and Creativity*, children's process of individuation is steeped in ludic activities.[1] During childhood, their gender identity is partially absorbed by playing. At a young age, playing at being a mother ("jugar a las mamás") is one fundamental way to educate and prepare girls for this role. In this sense, due to their supposedly innocent nature, games have helped to shape our notion of women's roles, closely tied to motherhood.[2]

Play is thus powerful, as it facilitates the acquisition of practical knowledge (*habitus*)[3] while participants are in a stress-free environment that distances them from daily responsibilities and routines. It simultaneously *distracts* players from the realization that such acquisition is taking place. Play can create alternative worlds, but we also learn how to behave in this one by developing a *habitus*. Hence the value, but also the danger, of play: it effortlessly instructs us, shaping our destinies, without the appearance of coercion. Play works with a set of conventions and an awareness of the game being played. A good player, according to Bourdieu, incarnates the game and performs whatever it needs at any given moment, which demands a disposition towards adaptability and invention due to the infinite circumstances in which the game can play out (*Other* 63). Playing is, therefore, spontaneous and restricted at the same time. However, as a free activity, play contains the seeds of subversion: players may reject the rules and create a game of their own.[4] To put it another way, as Judith Butler indicates, both the inscription within oppressive norms and the possible subversion of those norms are an integral part of the repetitive behaviour that we play out or perform as (men or) women (42).

In this article, I draw on the concept of play in my reading of Wiener's *Nine Moons,* both in her narrative and maternal articulation, to challenge what we might call the *doxa* of motherhood.[5] According to Adrienne Rich, motherhood is an institution full of precepts that oppress women, whether they have children or not. Yet mothering practices can also be the site, as Wiener's book suggests, of possible resistance.[6] I argue that here motherhood is constructed by means of a questioning of those affective practices that have produced the norm. By linking reproduction with play, *Nueve lunas* denaturalizes pregnancy, exposing its fabricated quality and restoring a certain autonomy to the field of reproduction. By participating in the game of reproduction, Wiener seeks to bring back its lost freedom. My

reading shows the narrative strategies that she employs to resist the socially established symbolic material of motherhood.

(PRO)CREATION

Nine Moons tells a familiar yet seldom-told story of pregnancy.[7] Specifically, it narrates the process leading up to the birth of the author's first child. This event becomes for her, a Peruvian writer based in Barcelona, a watershed in which all her relationships are transformed: her relationships with her parents, her career, her body and, ultimately, herself. It is the account of her first full-term pregnancy, and in witty prose she debunks a series of myths associated with the pregnant body and its popular representation, from the repulsive discovery of being pregnant to the distress and disappointment of giving birth within the Spanish medical system: "The doctor was in a hurry. Maybe he had an important dinner to get to. I knew I'd lost the battle, that my labor was no longer my own. I had failed" (Wiener, *Nine* 211).[8] This first-person account of her pregnancy unmasks romanticized conceptions of maternal love, the mother-daughter relationship, or the commonly held notion of pristine representations of pregnant women. "To begin with," Wiener admits, "pregnancy turns you into a bag of gases. There's not a shred of poetry in that, I can assure you" (22). Her incisive approach disassembles in nine acts the mechanisms that have favoured a mystified vision of procreation – shared by conventional literature about pregnancy, such as the many manuals and guides sold to first-time mothers.

The dominant model of motherhood in contemporary Western cultures imposes an impossible ideal for women to follow: it merges an idealization of the Virgin mother (asexual, self-sacrificing)[9] with neoliberal values (successful professionals who do not neglect domestic work), a model called "intensive motherhood" by Sharon Hays (1996), which has intensified in recent years with "a culture of total motherhood" (Warner 52). Yet feminists have suggested other types of motherhood. For example, Andrea O'Reilly argues that a feminist motherhood would be an oppositional discourse that resists definition, that emphasizes the power and value of motherhood, and that redefines motherly work as a social and political act such that women would develop "a purpose and identity outside and beyond motherhood" (11). Wiener's narrative also proposes to pluralize reproductive discourses so that women can choose (or refuse) to be mothers, free from guilt.

Nine Moons is a pregnancy compendium that exposes the most appalling intimacies of the process, discrediting popular platitudes about the reproductive process, starting from its claimed purity:

> And I was simply pregnant. Not so much because I had wanted to be. To use a cliché: with the way the world is, one can't afford the luxury of wanting something too much. These days, a woman gets pregnant because the idea doesn't disgust her. Though it does make her a bit queasy. (Wiener, *Nine* 26)

Motherhood is nothing but a social role that does not provide a totalizing identity to the woman who becomes a mother, and its temporary nature is evident when reading *Nueve lunas* in terms of play: pregnancy, like any other game, takes place in a specific lapse of time (nine months) and within a confined territory: the mother's body.

Wiener takes aim at the notion of motherhood as destiny, and makes us rethink fundamental questions: What does it mean to be a mother? What types of mothers are there? What is the process of becoming one? She asks these questions seeking not so much a conclusive definition as a way to dislodge some of the notions, meanings, and limits that are intrinsic to the idea of normative motherhood (the myth of the "good mother"), challenging taboos about the body and sexuality of pregnant women, as well as some of the topics and language suitable to represent it. According to Bourdieu, people accept the rules of the social game, either to maintain or increase their social and cultural capital, or to transform and change the relative value of that capital using different strategies (Bourdieu and Wacquant 99). In what follows, I focus on Weiner's self-writing as an account that runs counter to the generalizations and prescriptive literature common to motherhood books. Then, I address the conventional notions of reproduction by examining the corporeality of procreation and, specifically, the relationship between pregnancy and sexuality that Wiener questions. Finally, I turn to the affiliation that Wiener's narrative establishes with literature about procreation and the construction of her own literary genealogy.

NARRATIVE AND PLAY

Nueve lunas begins when Wiener finds out she is pregnant. She has just turned thirty and she is at a complicated moment in her life: she has recently gone through surgery, her father has been diagnosed with colon cancer, a good friend has died by suicide, and the magazine for which she has been working has closed down. "My father's prognosis unknown. My friend throwing herself into the void. My mammary glands hacked off. And now I had lost my job" (Wiener, *Nine* 4). These landmarks are the starting point for her narrative, yet her pregnancy – not yet on the list – will turn out to be the ultimate trigger for the metamorphosis that follows. We read the story of her body, told in the first person, from the very first line: "Over the past

months, nine, to be exact, I've come to think that pleasure and pain always have something to do with things entering or exiting your body" (3). So begins a playful narration of a body-in-transformation over the forty weeks of pregnancy, a textual game that blends reality and fiction. The story seems to develop with the rhythm of gestation, producing the illusion that the narrative unfolds as her fetus grows. However, the story is written in hindsight.

Wiener does not assume a single vantage point: events are introduced through ellipses, analepsis, and prolepsis, a way of presenting the story that requires readers to continuously update their understanding, making us participants in her game. The narrator is also the story's protagonist and shares the author's name. The journalist and poet Gabriela Wiener thus inhabits each of the levels of the narrative (as author-narrator-character) just as her body comes to be experienced as multiple. The subtlety of this metaleptic game makes her doubling imprecise, and the jumps from one level to another are vague and disorienting. This strategy of a character self-narrating her story produces a deliberate confusion between life and literature, as in the genre of *auto-fiction* and, at the same time, it gives independence to the narrator, eluding the impression of being controlled.[10]

Though organized into nine chapters corresponding to the months of pregnancy, the narrative is circular: the enigma of motherhood and how one becomes a mother refers to the account the reader has in their hands, revealing how her identity is "an ongoing discursive practice" (Butler 43). A provisional game that gives shape to her otherwise scattered story, pregnancy restructures her life and her narrative as a process that simultaneously gives birth to the story, to a child, and to Wiener herself as a mother.

The book thus explores what we might call the double split of her pregnancy: one body becomes two, which, in turn, provokes both a delirious rejection and a strong desire to find answers. Retrospectively, the inquiry starts when her daughter is born, as the narrator examines her own immediate past: from the conception of her daughter to her birth. According to Amanda Holmes, play is an activity that stimulates exploration and "allows participants to push past the structured boundaries that define their day-to-day identities" (70). Nonetheless, it requires stress-free conditions and assumes that the player's survival is not at risk (Burghardt 16). Hence, Wiener's play can only begin once the danger of the pregnancy itself is past.

The narrator writes to (re)construct a broken self caused by the transformation of her body, a split that at the same time has led her, as Anabel Gutiérrez suggests, to a revelation (416). Therefore, her narrative only begins after giving birth. We discover almost at the end of the story that

her account emerges in a transcendental moment when she is about to deliver her daughter: "*Now* I'm on the bed in the delivery room. I think that's J [her partner] dressed in green like just one more of the attendants filling the room. There are about ten people in there. As far as I know, not one of them bought a ticket to see the show" (Wiener, *Nine* 212; emphasis added). The present of enunciation creates the illusion that her narrative emerges in that same room, when relieved from the pain of contractions with epidural anaesthesia, she initiates the game that will lead her to reflect on her immediate past:[11]

> It was a relief. We grew so relaxed that J started taking photos and videos of me in which I pretended I was in pain. I posed, miming fake screams. Who would know? It would be the false version of my authentic suffering. I was in a kind of limbo, the Disneyland of labor. It made me laugh so hard to not be in pain that I peed myself and, since I was anesthetized, didn't even notice. Not until the nurse came in and dried me off. (210-11)

In other words, though pregnancy triggers her transformation, giving birth is both a point of departure and a rift from which her narrative originates. *Nine Moons* presents a prenatal digression that penetrates the crudest and most corporeal aspects of the reproductive experience that were previously confined to the margins of literature.[12] Likewise, Wiener renews the old creative metaphor ("spiritual pregnancy or the birth of a text")[13] that puts reproduction beneath cultural production, but she does so in order to disarticulate this trope: she creates a fiction in which she simultaneously gives birth to a child and a mother, as well as the tale of that process, in an attempt to give narrative order to the chaos her pregnancy has caused.

Yet Wiener does not abide by social norms and creates a game of her own with its own rubric: breaking motherhood's rules. She is, however, a slippery player, and she cheats sometimes at her own game, ironically by following some of these rules.[14] For example, she meets all the clinical expectations: she goes to medical visits despite feeling judged and invisible, takes part in prenatal classes, and obeys doctors' instructions during labour. During the first medical appointment at which she hears the heartbeat of her fetus, she confesses the importance of that moment in relation to the materiality of the reproductive process: "I would finally be able to confirm that something alive, something that wasn't my own soul, was inhabiting me. She put an ultrasound monitor on my belly" (Wiener, *Nine* 17). Yet she distances herself from the language and tradition that establish standard representations of pregnancy and the maternal body – a gesture she initiates from the title of her book: the reference to "nine moons," as well as

designating the time of gestation, is also an allusion to a category of online pornography that features pregnant women, as Wiener herself explains (105).

Pregnancy confers on the narrator a new temporal identity which she accepts at the end of the first month: a *pregnant* woman (Wiener, *Nueve*, 26).[15] A self that is more a process, like pregnancy itself, than a result; or better, her narrative gives voice to an ongoing I. As Sarah Ruddick notes, motherhood's profound mystification means that maternal voices are always already in continuous formation:

> Maternal voices have been drowned by professional theory, ideologies of motherhood, sexist arrogance, and child fantasy. Voices that have been distorted and censored can only be *developing* voices. Alternatively, silenced and edging toward speech, mothers' voices are not voices as they are but as they are becoming. (Ruddick 40)

Nine Moons underscores that Wiener's developing self is far from completion, and it is the narrative of a process in which she reveals all the intimacies and contradictions of a pregnant woman seeking to understand what it means to be a mother and what kind of mother she will be. It is a sort of bildungsroman in two senses: Wiener is developing a new self while gestating a new being, her daughter, at the same time as she is chronicling this double process.

For all the solemnity usually associated with pregnancy and motherhood in the manuals and guidebooks she consults, Wiener deliberately assumes, in Gutiérrez's terms, an irreverent stance: she practices wit and bizarreness as demystifying strategies in contrast to the transcendence she finds in her readings. Like a literary striptease with high doses of insolence and disproportion, her writing exposes many silenced topics about pregnant women: "How the hell am I supposed to bear all this stress without even a can of Coca-Cola? How is it that no one has yet created a designer drug for pregnant women? Prenatal ecstasy, LSD for expectant mothers, something like that" (Wiener, *Nine* 9). Just as Wiener synthesizes, motherhood is something of a game, and her narrative makes this evident, as she recalls her childhood:

> My sister and I had a game. We would announce: "Let's play mother and daughter." … And when I was the scriptwriter, some sort of tragedy always had to occur, a devastating earthquake, for example, that would infuse a little drama into the maternal role … It was lovely to be a mother when we were in danger. It made us better mothers. (10-11)

Nine Moons could be thus understood as an updating of that game, one full of tension, in which she is also the writer: the text therefore starts with that inventory of casualties prior to conception, and in this way, narratives of loss and of procreation become intertwined. Consequently, she assumes her new role as part of a game which always involves a risk for mothers. It is a game that only daughters learn to play because for her "the maternal world was a world for women alone" (Wiener, *Nine* 10).[16] She reveals the *habitus* of motherhood, both the practical skills regarding care and the beliefs about the individual "sacrifices" that are required to be a (good) mother.

Wiener's pregnancy accordingly adopts the playful nature of children's games through a narrative that undoes the popular image of pregnant women as passive and lethargic. In contrast to the usually circumspect image of motherhood, she offers a hectic story about the journey of becoming a mother, in which each milestone is wittily interpreted with a keen hyperrealism that demystifies the seriousness and anticipation of pregnancy, starting with the question of abortion: "I asked myself if it would be equally valid to write my own *Letter to a Child Never Born*, Oriana Fallaci's epistolary novel, if I had to add: 'because of my own fault'"(Wiener, *Nine* 22). In other words, whereas reproduction has always been attended by a ceremonious aura, as though mothering were the culmination of women's lives, *Nine Moons* neutralizes this idea by means of a heretical narrative restoring its playful quality.

Yet this is a game that, like Russian roulette, puts the player in the position of being on the verge of losing everything: "Suddenly, my history was the history of *another*" (Wiener, *Nine* 119-20). If every game implies a certain risk to its participants, Wiener confesses the danger that the game of reproduction poses, as, from the beginning her pregnancy threatens to interrupt her career, and the risks mount up until labour, when she fears for her own life. Reproduction would thus negate or jeopardize the self she has hitherto been performing. Her vacillation is, however, precisely because of all the contradictions involved in compliance to normative motherhood: "In the world of absolute uncertainty in which pregnant women live, everything becomes a matter of State. [They] are so easily manipulated it's disgusting" (Wiener, *Nine* 114). In this way, her narrative exposes the battle fought on the field of reproduction, a struggle which takes place in the body which becomes the actual field of power.[17]

BODY AND PLAY

The expectant body goes through a radical transformation during pregnancy, and *Nine Moons* is a confession (Gutiérrez 412) of this corporeal

crisis that affects Wiener's reality in all senses, including her immigrant status in Spain.[18] Wiener explored the limits of the corporeal in her previous book, *Sexografías* (2008), and this journey through the body continues here. As Cairati indicates, *Nine Moons* can be seen as the culmination of her particular style, a gonzo journalism, "a 'carnal' gonzo who explores, experiences and restores" (205, my translation). On this occasion, her narrative emphasizes both the ephemeral and exceptional quality of pregnancy since, like a game, it is presented as a temporary action outside of the habitual within a specific setting (Huizinga 13). Therefore, from the first line of her narrative, Wiener defines the boundaries and rules of play: a corporeal space sacralised by Western culture to the point that it has become intangible (and unutterable) despite its evident materiality.

The pregnant body provokes amazement and fascination because of its representation (as something monstrous), as well as its procreative abilities, hitherto considered an unresolved mystery (Crespo 16). It is a body that challenges our acquired ideas about the individual self and does not fit within a belief system hostile to anything beyond the norm. Rosemary Betterton compares the pregnant woman with the monstrous, since both undermine our notions about individuality and threaten to exceed the boundaries of the supposedly unitary self (85). In this way, the dynamics of pregnancy cause a double effect on women's subjectivity because, as Susan Bordo notices, "to deprive the woman of control over her reproductive life … is necessarily also to mount an assault on her personal integrity and autonomy … and to treat her merely as pregnant *res extensa*, material incubator of fetal subjectivity" (94). Consequently, reproduction has almost become indescribable except through clinical discourse, which has an aseptic lexicon that furthers its estrangement. *Nine Moons*, however, presents a narrative in which the pregnant body becomes the agent of that formerly sacred action turned now into pure play, a literary transgression of the Catholic vision of the maternal body as a sacred space in which women can redeem their fault, as well as the Petrarchan metaphor that represents the body as a temple.

Jane Gallop reminds us that the body is, by definition, an enigma in which we inhabit "perceivable givens that the human being knows as 'hers' without knowing their significance to her" (13), something that takes on full magnitude during pregnancy: the pregnant body changes and creates life in an inscrutable way for the mother-to-be. The body is then perceived as a stranger who hosts a being that is neither entirely other nor the same. Hence, the experience of pregnancy overflows the thresholds of our logic since it takes place within and beyond the womb. The pregnant self in *Nine Moons* is both subject and object, and offers a paradoxical vision of the

pregnant body between agency and alienation. According to Iris Marion Young, this contradiction is the reality of a pregnant woman since she is simultaneously connected and disconnected, duplicated and disjointed, head and trunk (46). For Julia Kristeva, pregnancy is the proof of the radical split of the subject: "Redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and another, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech" ("Women" 31). Furthermore, pregnancy establishes a paradoxical relationship of dependency and disassociation, and is, as Elixabete Imaz observes, popularly associated with metaphors of symbiosis, invasion, and excision (234), sensations usually experienced all at once. Wiener presents her own pregnancy as an intrusion: "It was a parasite that lived off my expense, extracting its strength and nourishment from my body. It breathed my oxygen. And I panted" (*Nine* 30). This occupant not only threatens to alter her existence but is also depleting her own health whilst growing.

Though not as sudden as Gregor Samsa's, her metamorphosis is somehow Kafkaesque: Wiener sees how her body is transformed over forty weeks without her being able to intervene, just as her world is modified because of this very transformation: "Everyone seems so concerned about us, asking if it's a boy or a girl, and how much longer until the big event. It's like being famous" (Wiener, *Nine* 170). Due to this lack of control over her metamorphosis, she even questions her own insemination: only a home pregnancy test certifies a condition that, in the moment, seems imaginary as everything is taking place at an abstract level:

> The most powerful feelings upon discovering that you're pregnant have to do with the unreality of the math. They've told you it's there, that it will multiply in size, that now it's the shape of a peanut, and then a cherry, and so on, but you don't see it, you don't feel it. (Wiener, *Nine* 6)

Her body grows on its own and she can only observe and report the changes: it becomes an autonomous organism creating life beyond her jurisdiction. To counter this loss of command, she writes about it. Pregnancy then also establishes a paradoxical relationship with writing, one of agency and alienation: Weiner cannot control pregnancy itself, but she can control of the narrative about it.

For the fetus is not yet autonomous, and rather than a material reality, it is a product of maternal imagination: Wiener is making and shaping her embryo alongside her own growth as she better understands that intrauterine life. At first, she therefore does not acknowledge the other who inhabits her as a human being, but as an imaginary entity, or a poetic form: "I decided to write my own zoological turn of phrase: 'At four weeks, a child

is like the ghost of a seahorse" (Wiener, *Nine* 7). However, the tendency to shroud procreation in rhapsodic terms is not left unquestioned: "Why should maternity draw us immediately into lyrical digressions and take us to the edge of inanity? Could the mere possibility of having a baby with the face of a frightened monkey in our arms be enough to trigger that unbridled tenderness?" (Wiener, *Nine* 14). She takes this questioning to an extreme when she acknowledges the ambivalence of her feelings and reveals that at times "darker thoughts overtook [her]" (Wiener, *Nine* 32). Contrasting the poetic sensibility of overwhelming affection, which is pervasive in popular culture, Wiener acknowledges the existence of two contradictory drives: of life and of death, the two poles between which she oscillates during pregnancy. Indulging the sinister side, she explores the dark web looking for all kinds of macabre horror: "On Rotten, I succumbed to an irresistible link. It said: 'The Ultimate Taboo.' The Internet can transport you from one feeling to another, abysmally different feeling, in a single click" (Wiener, *Nine* 28). She puts a halt to her quest only when she encounters the image of a man devouring a baby: "For pure realism, it's even worse than Goya's" (Wiener, *Nine* 29).

That vision reminds her of the mythical origins of the human species and the fear of replacement by her progenies: "I was beginning to be devoured. There was no doubt about it. From the inside out" (Wiener, *Nine* 29). The primordial revulsion, primary and primitive, aroused by procreation is usually omitted in pregnancy books and guides, yet it is one of the strong emotions that a mother-to-be can experience: "I could sense the tremendous power that would be conferred upon me. Giving life had begun to cause me true terror, above all because, for a mother, to give and to take are too close to hand" (Wiener, *Nine* 38).[19] Such fantasies prompt a recollection of her reproductive past in which she had repeatedly abandoned the game: her three former abortions that serve to normalize women's self-determining choices and disrupt the presumable sanctity of reproduction. While a player reserves the right to continue playing or to quit the game, in reproduction the latter means the elimination of either the embryo or the mother. Yet nowadays abortion is still socially chastised (and illegal in many countries, like Peru). *Nine Moons* questions the legislation that disregards women's choice, since anti-abortion discussion about when human life begins only diverts attention from women's control of their own bodies and reproductive rights.

Wiener's ambivalence, however, does not end when she confirms the presence of her embryo with an ultrasound. She continues to be wary of that progress as it escapes her control: she is undergoing a corporeal metamorphosis that she cannot govern or modify. Her fetus (a "super-

subject," in Bordo's terms [88],) is presented then as another participant or player, one that implements its own rules and takes over the course of the game to improve its chances of winning: "But the baby just went right on gobbling up all of my red blood cells. … At that moment, more than anything else, my small inhabitant seemed like a tumor. Its cells rapidly grew and multiplied, penetrating my tissues and eroding my blood vessels" (Wiener, *Nine* 30). As if in a gothic novel, the ghost sets the rules but cannot leave the house, or in this case, the womb: an internal and external game that blurs that very division "because for [women] the two are continuous, not polar," as Rich reminds us (64).

Seeing her belly growing also alters Wiener's relationship with her body in a positive or satisfying way:

> It was the first time I didn't feel like I had to make excuses to my friends about my current physical condition: it went beyond me and what I wanted for myself. In fact, it was the first time that I didn't feel paunchy… My real gut was now hidden behind my virtual gut. (Wiener, *Nine* 80)

At the same time, she experiences how that relationship gradually erodes expectations of privacy: "People give us their seats on the metro and the bus, they let us go right to the window at the bank and we even cast our votes during elections without having to stand in line. ... There's no privacy whatsoever for a pregnant woman" (169-70). Yet she is also anxious that her flabbiness will persist after pregnancy and fears the prospect of a postnatal saggy belly full of stretch marks. She sees a friend's stomach, "as striped as a tiger, or worse, it looked like a pair of tigers had gotten into a brawl on her belly" (81), and responds in alarm: "That same night, I started to rub snail extract cream onto my belly. On TV they said it would work" (81).[20] With the apparent frivolity of a merely aesthetic issue, *Nine Moons* exposes the heterosexist logic that sentences women to an impossible standard of beauty. Pregnant bodies do not belong to Western ideals of attractiveness but are "bizarre pleasures, alongside zoophilia, obese women and the elderly. Apparently pregnant women were a pornographic species in themselves, called 'nine moons'" (105). In this way, what would otherwise be veiled (and thus nonexistent) is made visible: an absurd social norm which insists a woman's body should always be young, fit, slim, and white, or otherwise be confined to the abject category of "bizarre" bodies.

The witch, the whore, and the stepmother combine everything a good mother cannot be in Western culture: sensual, daring, owner of her own pleasure, evil, frivolous, distant, egotistic… At the beginning of the novel Wiener is presented as a future mother with some antithetical

characteristics: she has undergone surgery to have her third nipple removed and her own mother reminds her that "in other times, women with supernumerary breasts were burned as witches" (Wiener, *Nine* 4). Moreover, she was working for a sensationalist magazine writing mainly about sex,[21] at the same time as finishing "a testimonial with the trappings of a questionable erotic novel [*Sexografías*]" (Wiener, *Nine* 20). As a writer, Wiener does not hide her sexuality; on the contrary, she exhibits it. She is narrating the story of her body as a sexual agent that decides when, how and with whom (or with what) she will satisfy her urges. *Nine Moons* looks to overcome that polarization and endorses the existence of conflicting emotions in the mother figure. Significantly, the daughter to whom she ultimately gives birth is named after Magdalena, a woman who in the Christian tradition "deviated" from the norm but later found redemption. As Wiener is giving birth to this girl, she is the creator of a new woman, neither saint nor witch: Lena, also "the name of the main character from Faulkner's *Light in August*, a novel that had deeply affected J and told the story of a pregnant woman named Lena who embarks on a long journey in search of the father of her baby" (Wiener, *Nine* 149). Here the pregnant woman is still in search of the mother, that is, in search of herself.

Her journey is, therefore, to her home country – Peru. In the fourth month of her pregnancy, visiting her family in Lima, her dormant sex drive reawakens, linking the maternal home with sexuality. On the one hand, this is the place where she started her sex life and, on the other, it is where she irreversibly accepts her role as a mother. She first played mothers and daughters here and explored her own eroticism: "My dolls, teddy bears, stuffed ducks, Barbies, and other little playthings were my true school of horrors" (Wiener, *Nine* 90). One of the biggest taboos about pregnant women is, precisely, their sexuality and hence Wiener finds that her desire is classified as bizarre. Her libido is unsuitable within the popular belief that pregnant women are devoid of sexual desire and only fulfilled by the love for their future offspring, a legacy of Catholicism and the omnipresence of the Virgin Mary and the Marian cult in Latin America.

Wiener challenges this platitude and tells us what she discovers regarding sex, pornography and pregnancy, transgressing norms that censor female sexuality: "Some pregnant women … think about nothing but sex" (*Nine* 105). Her own desire takes her to look for other pregnant women to have online sex: "I thought that only I, and other bulbous women, would be curious about pregnant women's bodies. I was wrong. I discovered an underworld revolving around so-called 'belly bumps' [*sic*]" (105).[22] Pregnancy has been considered a rite of passage in which the mother-to-be is perceived as sexless and docile, passively awaiting the day when she will

finally embark upon the role for which she has always been fated. Wiener confronts this conception of pregnant women by giving voice to a body that has traditionally been invisible and mute. She takes agency and narrates her pregnancy in the first person and hence names and gives existence to a silenced reality: a reproductive I that dispels the Aristotelian notion of the gestating body as a mere vessel, the passive recipient of male generative power.

Nine Moons thus offers a disruptive view of normative reproduction: autonomous, confused, and full of obstacles that are gradually overcome. As in any game, it also has a different temporality, and its rules can be altered by introducing new lines of action. Wiener observes that procreation has its own timer:

> Women play all the time with the great power that has been conferred upon us: it's fun to think about reproducing. Or not reproducing. When you're fifteen, the idea is fascinating, it attracts you like a piece of chocolate cake. When you're thirty, the possibility attracts you like an abyss. (*Nine* 6)

The reproductive game in neoliberal societies establishes specific coordinates and urges women to participate in it, especially when time is about to run out, as Silvia Nanclares recounts in her autobiographical narrative *Quién quiere ser madre* (2017) or Noemí López Trujillo in her essay *El vientre vacío* (2019).

As Bourdieu reminds us, the sense of the game is not about reaching a specific goal in the future, rather it is "engendered by a *habitus* adjusted to the immanent tendencies of the field" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 138). *Nine Moons* then can be understood as the relationship Wiener establishes with her *habitus* and the field of reproduction. The procreative horizon has different meanings according to the position and stance of each agent. Wiener has turned thirty and finds herself at a turning point: the play therefore takes on intense nuances. Consequently, throughout her narrative she insists on an apocalyptic vision of motherhood, comparing pregnancy to death's waiting room: "We fell silent for a few seconds looking at the indicator; it's like looking at the gun you're going to use to kill yourself" (Wiener, *Nine* 5). And she is grieving, but unlike the pain of a miscarriage (as, for example, in Paula Bonet's journal), or the distress of being unable to conceive (as in Silvia Nanclares), Wiener is mourning her life as she knows it, while preparing for a new one: "They wished me luck as if I were going away on a trip. Conclusion: I could die" (198). As a result, reproduction is presented as a deadly game, and pregnancy as an ultimatum threatening to destroy everything: "While the tiny tadpole struggled to bind itself to life, I

was thinking that we were headed straight for disaster. My future, and J's, hung by a thread" (30). Wiener's life in Barcelona is now in danger because of her new status.

And so Wiener considers having another abortion. This hesitation about reproduction is shared by many pregnant women, though it is still somehow unmentionable. As Imaz observes in her study, women usually dislike their affective or financial situation in sight of motherhood, as they considered it must be undertaken under very stable economic conditions (202). Such a violent contradiction regarding reproduction is due to the great divide between the experience of reproduction and the imposition of a normative vision that seems to contemplate only one (sanitized and alienated) version of motherhood. Wiener, instead, challenges normative beliefs and explores what we might call the "dark side" of the nine moons.

PROCREATION AND PLAY

Pregnancy's mystification is enabled and enhanced by the erasure of the maternal body from Western culture and philosophy: there has been a lack of reasoning about reproduction due to its unutterability, and it is seen as aesthetically inadequate due to its radical corporeality.[23] Wiener needs to break that silence, to find answers: "I had also been devoting a great deal of time to reading books. It was good for me to read in an attempt to understand what was happening to me" (*Nine* 57). Hence each chapter combines more or less scientific descriptions about the gradual development of her fetus with cultural and philosophical digressions that this same development unravels without obeying any concrete rule: a game of accumulation of references with neither method nor filter that asserts an independent view of reproduction, one that questions the monolithic construction of prescriptive motherhood. And by means of play, she reveals that maternal practices can include an ensemble of antagonistic relations that compete to establish their preferred forms of capital.

Pregnancy guides – of which there are ever more to be found online – are challenged: "Books don't prepare you for what's coming. Manuals for pregnant women must have been written by mothers completely drugged by love for their children, without the slightest pinch of critical distance" (Wiener, *Nine* 9). For Wiener, the game is about gathering up all her discoveries about reproduction: "Alongside the pile of books about sexual perversions, a separate tower composed of maternity handbooks, month-by-month pregnancy guides, and psychology texts for first-time mothers was taking shape" (21). She leaves nothing out: from mythological allusions to pop culture references, to feminist criticism of mother figures. In this way, *Nine Moons* embodies Luce Irigaray's feminine imaginary: one without

hierarchies nor individualizations, which wants to infiltrate culture in order to promote transformations in society and history ("Questions" 136). Wiener then places herself beyond the space and role codified and assigned to the mother by Catholicism, and popularized and institutionalized by Western medicine.[24] Playing with this (anti)tradition, Wiener seeks to find answers to the question she raised during her first trimester: "And what kind of mother would I be?" (*Nine* 69). Facing her new maternity, Wiener looks back on other cultural models, enlarging the intertextuality of her narrative.

She goes beyond her own review of the maternal produced by Western culture and decides to assume her motherhood *outside* this tradition: Greek tragedy, Roman history, mythology, and Western cinema have produced mothers killed by their children (like Clytemnestra or Agrippina), invisible mothers (like Athena), or suffering mothers who die for their offspring, examples she prefers to distance herself from. Wiener chooses to play with her own rules, looking for other models, thus creating an intertextual game that anticipates a pluralized vision of motherhood. In other words, Wiener abandons one tradition in order to create her own decentered, non-normative version.

Throughout Wiener's narrative, motherhood is a question mark since she refuses to conform to the dominant cultural practice of the game. And it is also an interrogation that echoes the persistent questioning to which women are subject:

> Today, a woman with a certain postfeminist bent has the option of being a little of everything: she can use contraceptives and postpone motherhood, she can abort in the case of carelessness or mental confusion. She can get married or cohabitate, be an economist or a housewife, or both at the same time. But she can also choose, instead of giving birth in a hospital, to do so at home and in the water, with the help of a midwife, remaining coherent the whole time. She can have a baby and quit her job as a high-level executive in a multinational corporation in order to spend more time with said baby. A liberated woman and the ideal mother. Can she do it all? For my part, I was having problems seeing myself as a postfeminist. (*Nine* 124)

In the neoliberal context in which *Nine Moons* is set, emphasis is on individual choice. Post-feminism stresses the importance of freedom and personal choice at a time in which individualism and consumer culture are central. With irony and humor, Wiener challenges these neoliberal values within a post-feminist discourse that simultaneously includes and discards them.

At first, she rejects the idea of being a mother. The anxiety provoked by her pregnancy leads her to consider having an abortion, ending the

reproductive game: "Every day I told J that if we had any doubts at all we still had time to end this thing" (Wiener, *Nine* 22). But this time she does not terminate her pregnancy and sticks with the game, albeit with rules of her own. The prospect of being a mother unfolds her disbelief of conventional feelings of happiness as well as a more disturbing homicidal tendency: "I don't know if it was the Molotov cocktail of hormones, but that 'fantastical adventure called pregnancy,' 'the most thrilling wait of your life,' 'those nine unforgettable months,' had unleashed my darkest of dark sides" (28). And so she explores, as I mentioned before, the online catalogues of morbidity and abhorrence in websites such as Rotten.com. For Isabel Abellán, this revulsion is also paired with desire as Wiener shows interest in both the macabre and cheap porn on local television channels (126).

"Why is there an obsession with motherhood?" Wiener asks (*Nine* 24). Though Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex* addresses an anti-maternal perspective as early as the late 1940s, pronatalist motives remain in a blurry zone. Many people do not have exact answers, but a personal or familiar longing at most, and sometimes simply they are carried along by inertia: it is a habit of reproduction without a solid rationality. Having children means then to take on a new role – becoming parents – and the rationale of reproduction is nothing but a tautology: people want to have children due to a somewhat irrational desire to be parents.[25] Still, "what causes a person to yearn to become a mother/father even in cases in which it goes against their own nature, exposing them to incomprehension and social isolation?" (128), Wiener asks herself. And in her search for answers, she keeps on playing, but this time she enters into the world of *Second Life,* an online immersive videogame. She generates several avatars that not only provide assorted reproductive models, but also serve as a counterpoint to her heterosexual motherhood. All these characters reinforce her view on reproduction as a contingent choice, while revealing that there is a relationship between fictional and physical creation. That is, writing about reproduction reveals the power of language and the relevance of discursive self-construction: a "second life" that may be also understood as a game one woman (the "second" sex) plays when she becomes a mother.

In conclusion, *Nine Moons* shows a pregnant body that has been self-desecrated to reveal its darkest secrets, the most abject and obscure details of reproduction that were once hidden. It is Wiener's own metamorphosis and her way of taking the floor: she challenges normative beliefs by playing the game of reproduction while revealing there is no one single way of being a mother, nor any single prescriptive discourse. Wiener discloses a subject in becoming who is both textually and corporeally (pro)creating. Her pregnancy has provoked a far-reaching transformation in her world

forming new relations. It opens the body to otherness in a way that makes the experience physically and mentally permeable, a porosity that could serve as a model for more open relationships and a new notion of the self.[26] Wiener will *also* be a mother, just another part of her personality as *Nine Moons* confirms: she does not stop being a writer. And the day she gives birth she finally tells us that the juncture has come. In her iconoclastic style, she recalls:

> I can feel her coming, I see her, held aloft, smeared with fluids from my womb, warm, discolored, with the face of a boxer. They show her to me like a waiter shows you a bottle of wine, as if I could say that I don't want her. They lay her on top of me. She's no longer an extension of me. She's another. (*Nine* 215)

Wiener brings her story of playing at pregnancy to an end when her daughter is born, and she starts a new relationship as a mother, a new aspect of herself that is yet to be created. We are given glimpses of this new game she is beginning to play in a brief epilogue that ends her book with euphoria, fear, pleasure, disbelief, and, of course, play, as the book concludes as it began, with a daughter playing at being a mother:

> Lena prepares a plate of dry leaves, twigs, and raw noodles. Now she's the one who feeds me. She raises her small spoon and feeds me invisible bites that taste delicious. She tells me her baby pooped and she puts one of her own diapers on him. Then she puts him in a little stroller, slings a bag over her shoulder, and waves goodbye. (Wiener, *Nine* 220).

With this farewell, Wiener's young daughter is off to play this new game of mother and daughter, that readers can expect to continue learning about in her later writing.[27]

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NOTES

1 More recent studies have continued to emphasize that "play is the act of self-creation" (MacNamara 55). Some of the ideas included in this article are further discussed in *(Pro)creación. Escritura y maternidad en la España contemporánea* (Ediciones Libertarias, 2022).

2 Judith Butler, following Nietzsche, argues that it is behaviour (not "essence") that constitutes gender – without an agent or doer, only actions exist: "Gender

is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44).

3 According to Bourdieu, *habitus* is "a system of models of perception and appreciation, as cognitive and evaluative structures which are achieved through the lasting experience of a social position. The habitus is at once a system of models for the production of practices and a system of models for the perception and appreciation of practices" (*Other* 131).

4 All relationships of domination – material or symbolic–activate a resistance: "The dominated – in any social world – can always exert a certain force, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 80).

5 Following Bourdieu, the *doxa* of any social field is all its unquestioned ideologies, primary beliefs, and presuppositions (*Practical* 169).

6 In recent years, the field of motherhood has been very fertile: many publications in Spanish (which exceed the frame of this paper) address topics centered in demystifying or unmasking motherhood, although these "maternal chronicles," as Marina Bettaglio puts it, "at times camouflage a dangerous re-masking (to borrow Susan Maushart's famous definition), one that aims to maintain the status quo or even to undo the advances in gender equality achieved in the last forty years" (232). This emergence of reproductive narratives is not exclusive to Spanish-language authors (see, for example, Garcés for French narratives, and Gurton-Wachter or Schwartz for North American). In addition to these maternal accounts, critical analysis about motherhood in neoliberal times have emerged; for Spanish society, see Olmo, Merino, Vivas, or López Trujillo.

7 While pregnancy was one of the first objects of symbolic representation – with Paleolithic Venuses (Crespo 17) – it was eventually confined to the cultural margins in which it still circulates. Pregnant women have been both honoured and hidden in Western culture (hence the dearth of literary texts about the topic), although it changed since the 1960s and today, according to Visa and Crespo, pregnancy is more celebrated than ever (100). Such overexposure and saturation of information and tips regarding pregnancy takes place in guides, blogs, magazines, forums, social media, and websites, since motherhood, as Laura Freixas reminds us, has an unspoken pact with subculture because sexual hierarchy is reflected not only in political or financial power, but also in culture (147).

8 All citations are from the English translation by Jessica Powell.

9 See Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," for more about this maternal model.

10 *Nueve lunas* was published just as autofictions were prompting a lively critical debate in the Hispanic literary field: see Alberca and Casas.

11 It should be noticed that the title of this last chapter is not the month as the other ones, but the exact date of the birth: "July 29th."

12 As Michelle Boulous Walker reminds us, "women are silenced because they are radically alienated from the discourses constructing their bodies. Women's disarticulated body remains both unspeakable and unspoken in the symbolic domain." Hence pregnancy, a corporeal experience seen as female alone, has always circulated at the margins of literature and philosophy (130).

13 For more on the reproductive metaphor used in literary discourses and their differences between sexes, see Stanford Friedman, "Creativity."

14 Although we may think too that "before you can dismantle a house you need to know how it is built" (Ahmed 19), so Wiener explores the normative (medicalized) path in order to be able to undo it.

15 In the Spanish original this is more evident as she puts "una chica embarazada," so "pregnant" is understood as the new adjective that describes her.

16 As Nancy Chodorow notes, "women come to mother because they have been mothered by women" (211), a situation that has created the unequal sexual division in the family and society.

17 According to Bourdieu, a field of power is a space of play and competition in which the agents and social institutions with enough specific capital, particularly cultural and economic, confront each other with strategies aiming to preserve or transform that balance of forces (Bourdieu and Wacquant 76).

18 While her former identity as a writer collapses – "I would no longer be able to produce the same daring stories at the same pace as before. And at some point, I had to admit, I wouldn't be able to produce anything. Except, probably, milk" (31) – her vulnerable position as immigrant is gaining ground. "What would we do with a child outside of Peru?" (13) – she asks herself when her test is positive, emphasizing her unstable current financial situation: "My child: Europe is the best place for a Latin American to starve to death and drink good wine. Welcome" (13). Such ambivalence as an emerging successful writer with a precarious legal status is highlighted by her pregnancy.

19 Katixa Agirre explores this drive in her recent book about an infanticide, *Las madres no* (2019).

20 This apprehension towards the postpartum body is a recurring topic in blogs and magazines about pregnancy (with an important pharmacological market behind lifting creams and other products) that I also found in other pregnancy literary texts: Carme Riera, for example, in her epistolary journal to her unborn daughter, *Tiempo de espera*, remarks that "having a belly now is normal, but bear it later is an antiaesthetic hassle [she is] not willing to allow" (139; my translation).

21 She used to work for a magazine as their "kamikaze" journalist because she actively participated in the stories she wrote about: for example, as an egg donor or as participant in group sex sessions (Wiener, *Nine* 20).

22 *Nine Moons*' fifth chapter on sexuality was first published in *Sexografías* (2008) with the title "While you were sleeping."

23 For more about the silencing of reproduction, see Walker.

24 Medical discourses have turned women into beings incapable of control over their own bodies and still today there is an alarming tension between women's emancipation and the supposed biological essence of their reproducibility. Kelly Oliver, for instance, affirms that biology has been taken as proof that women are before anything else a body that reproduces without a creative mind (29). Emily Martin reminds us that the mechanistic metaphor for explaining the human body remains in force, therefore women are seen as an industrial factory of babies (37).

25 For more about the rationale of reproduction, see Imaz.

26 "Pregnancy reveals a paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves" (Young, 46).

27 Wiener has published her journey through motherhood in different formats, for instance as articles for the newspapers she collaborates with, such as *El País* or *The New York Times*, and a performance (*Qué locura enamorarme yo de ti*) directed by playwright Mariana de Althaus, in which Wiener explains and performs her polyamorous journey along with her two partners, Peruvian poet Jaime Rodríguez and Spanish writer Rocío Lanchares.

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