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Lorraine M. López: A Personal Introduction to an Outstanding Latina Literary and Cultural Studies Critic and Fiction Writer[1]

Rafael Ocasio

Dr. Lorraine M. López, the Gertrude Conaway Professor of English at Vanderbilt University, where she teaches in the Creative Writing Program, formally came into my life as a literary critic when, several years ago, she invited me to contribute to a collection of essays that she was co-organizing in honor of writer Judith Ortiz Cofer. To say that I was honored to get such an invitation was, as it is commonly expressed, an understatement. For years I had known about her through Ortiz Cofer, who often referred to her as "my friend Lorraine" in our many conversations about her professional connections with Latino and Latina writers. They indeed had a close friendship. Ortiz Cofer had been her mentor at the University of Georgia, where López received a doctorate in creative writing. I too was a friend of Judith, whom I had met in Atlanta in 1989, the year her first novel was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. As she had been for López, Judith became my mentor. We often met in formal interview sessions at the University of Georgia, where she excitedly spoke about her growing network of Latino and Latina writers, who were actively creating a rising literature, known today as Latinx. López's fiction was always Judith's favorite topic of discussion.

Judith was over the moon when López won Curbstone Press's inaugural Miguel Mármol prize for fiction for *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories* (2002), López's first published short story collection. After hearing Judith's rave review, followed by, "this is a must read, *mi'jo*," I knew I had to read it. This humorously-titled collection has left me hooked on López's short fiction ever since.

López's second book, the novel *Call Me Henri* (2006), published by Northwestern University Press, was awarded the Paterson Prize for Young Adult Literature. Her short story collection *Homicide Survivors Picnic* won the Writers League of Texas Award and was named a finalist for the 2010 PEN/Faulkner Prize. A prolific fiction writer, López's most recent novels include *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* (2008), *The Realm*

of Hungry Spirits (2011), and *The Darling* (2015), a finalist for Foreword Review's INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award and a 2016 book club selection by Las Comadres and Friends National Latino Book Club.

As a Latin American literature scholar, I am most familiar with López's critical work. Her collections *An Angle of Vision: Women Writers on Their Poor or Working-Class Roots* (2009) and *The Other Latin@: Writing against a Singular Identity* (2001) bring together voices of writers from a variety of racial, economic, and sexual orientation backgrounds who must navigate socio-economic institutions that, plainly put, work against them. It is often an overwhelming task. In spite of my own condition as a person of color, however, some of the experiences detailed are ones I have not fully experienced as a cisgender man. Unsurprisingly, my Latina students at Agnes Scott College have read—actually devoured—the articles from this collection, which serve as a "road map" to navigating the patriarchal limits imposed upon them as women of color. In the words of López, "A writer is an author in a literal sense, often while also claiming authority over her own life. Even so, leaving poverty and powerlessness behind is no easy feat. Many never have the opportunity to attempt it, and few succeed" ("Introduction: Joining the Conversation" 3).

López's passion and the crux of her literary craft lies in her underscoring women of color's life experiences as examples of effective tools for social change. The proclaimed activism of López, both as a writer and a critic, have appealed to me as a guiding North star. As the first Latino and Queer faculty ever granted tenure at Agnes Scott, I have come to understand—rather, to experience—the many facets, often contradictory, behind my own categorization as Latino and Queer, both in terms of a racialized and social label. Boldly, López has taken *el toro por los cuernos* ("the bull by its horns"); she has called for the need of a critical analysis of the ideological implications of the term Latino:

> All Latinos share some Latin American heritage. Apart from this, there is no essential or singular trait of Latino identity. Nonetheless, in the United States, Latinos or Hispanics are often viewed as a monolithic and homogeneous group. Of course, this is an impossibly narrow categorization, an imaginary space for filing diverse people in a singular slot for purposes of fast access and easy comprehension. (Falconer and López 1)

Nonetheless, I am also mindful that as a Puerto Rican-born person, my handling of the term takes a different socio-political connotation. In the words of López, "Many Latinos are likewise complicit in construct-

ing this fictive categorization in order to create the illusion of solidarity, the myth of unanimity that promises national political power" (1). Indeed, López's powerful statement was in my mind during my formal conversations with Judith, whose literary work I solidly categorized and analyzed as *Puerto Rican,* not as Latino, given her strong reflection on and her frequent representations of those Puerto Rican cultural practices that survived the so-called Puerto Rican immigrant experience in the United States.

López became Lorraine to me after she invited me to submit a critical piece on the work of Ortiz Cofer for a collection entitled *Rituals of Movement in the Writings of Judith Ortiz Cofer* (2012). She insisted that I interview Judith with an angle that displayed, as López highlighted in her introduction to the collection, Judith's "unusual childhood years, spent between the mainland and the island, as the catalyst for her interest in navigating the many coexisting cultures within the Puerto Rican barrio" (xxix). To Lorraine I also owe the suggestion that I press Ortiz Cofer to speak about "her interpretation of the island's often controversial colonial association with the United States."

For the last three years, I have worked closely with Lorraine, though under sad circumstances. On December 30, 2016, after the untimely transition of Judith, who battled a brave fight with cancer, I immediately contacted Lorraine with a proposal to co-edit a special issue for *South Atlantic Review* honoring the memory of our late beloved friend. Lorraine accepted my invitation without hesitation. In the process of working together through the shared memory of our respective relationships with Judith, Lorraine became a key person in my grieving process.

Lorraine and I, along with Dr. Elena Olazagasti-Segovia, concluded a critical anthology of Puerto Rican folklore stories that Judith had left unpublished. Lorraine edited Judith's unfinished stories, which Elena translated into Spanish, and all of us wrote personal articles that highlighted our relationships with Judith, a mentor and a friend to all of us. Nonetheless, unbeknownst to Lorraine, she had indirectly impacted Judith's handling of Puerto Rican oral folklore. Although for several years Judith and I discussed what she liked to call her "re-interpretations" of her abuela's cuentos, I owe it to Lorraine that for my *Rituals of Movement* interview, I asked Judith how "the stories serve a purpose for the immigrant" (Ocasio 33). Re-reading López's introduction to *An Angle of Vision*, I am struck by López's direct allusion to certain types of folk stories as tools of survival for oppressed women: "But these are women—like the braggart's daughter, with help from Rumpelstiltskin—capable of weaving shaggy clumps of straw into shiny nuggets of gold" (4).

Lorraine and I frequently corresponded during our projects, often in the early morning hours (she, like me, likes to write freshly awake at the start of each day), and I have seen a snapshot of a consummate professional, wife, mother, grandmother, and writer who handles a busy schedule that includes frequent readings, such as the one at the SAMLA conference. She is currently serving as Chair of the Department of English and as director of Latino and Latina Studies at Vanderbilt University, and is the associate editor for *The Afro-Hispanic Review*. In 2016, she was honored by Vanderbilt University with the Harvie Branscomb Distinguished Professor Award.

For my introduction to her keynote address at the SAMLA meeting, I asked Lorraine to describe her forthcoming work. She has completed a linked-story collection and a novel. The collected narratives comprise a campus comedy titled "Postcards from the Gerund State," and the titular piece is a novella about the struggles women artists face and the conflicts—large and small—that ensue in an arts residency in Wyoming. The novel, "What We Have Here," describes the experiences of a cross-dressing metal refinisher who accompanies his ex-wife and her children on a journey along El Camino Real through the California Mission system, a narrative that includes state history during the time Fray Junípero Serra oversaw the mission settlements. An interesting historical coincidence, Fray Junípero spent time in my native Old San Juan, and his whereabouts have been memorialized on a street plaque.

This was not our first Latino connection through a "common culture," as she wrote in her introduction to *The Other Latin@* (1). I found out that she is a Chicana-Riqueña (does anyone remember that groundbreaking journal *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*?). She enjoys ropa vieja, that salted flank steak beef stew, a quintessential item in Puerto Rican cuisine, which she savors from a Puerto Rican restaurant in Nashville, Tennessee. (Can you believe there is a Puerto Rican restaurant in Nashville but none near my home in Decatur, Georgia!) Again, even as I write this, I am terribly mindful of the ethnocentric implication that my statement may suggest: our connection stemming solely from a shared culture-bound so-called "Hispanic" dish. Nonetheless, I am drawing from my memories of the many meals I have shared with follow Latino and Latin American friends where food, whether ropa vieja, picadillo, empanadas, or pernil were not our shared connection to a sentimental home but our way "to honor," in the words of López, "the multiplicity of voices in our cultural group" ("Introduction," *The Other Latin@* 7).

At a more deeply-felt personal level, Lorraine and I have also written to each other about issues concerning Latinos in today's rather convoluted political arena. Her expressed sentiments of solidarity to me after

Hurricane María desolated Puerto Rico in 2017 immensely helped me to navigate a trip to the island a mere week after the catastrophe, where I had traveled to lend a hand to my mother and my sister, who were overwhelmed with their living conditions. Indeed, through her kind words of encouragement I came to experience the personal connection that Lorraine feels for the Latino community.

As I highlighted in my opening remarks at the SAMLA 90th conference, I was honored that Lorraine accepted my invitation to be our keynote speaker. On a personal level, I am thankful for her continued support of the projects that celebrate the work of our dear late mentor, Judith, whose memory SAMLA recognized with an honorary posthumous membership. Most importantly, *muchas gracias*, Lorraine, for allowing me to grieve the loss of friend in the best way I know of . . . through the magic of the spoken word.

Dr. Lorraine M. López, a researcher of notable importance in Latinx Studies, a mentor to so many, and someone I am extremely proud to call my *compañera en la lucha*. I know that the readers of this special issue are in for an exciting reading of the work of a masterful pen in today's Latinx literature.

Notes

1. This is a revised and expanded version of my introduction to Lorraine M. López as keynote speaker at SAMLA 90's conference, which took place in November 2018 in Birmingham, Alabama.

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About the Author

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A Note from the Guest Editors

Tanya Long Bennett, Cameron Williams Crawford, Donna A. Gessell, and Laura J. Getty

Greetings! We welcome this opportunity to present scholarship on Lorraine M. López, which we hope will pave the way for further research on her writing. This project began with a request from Rafael Ocasio, former SAMLA president and organizer of the 2018 SAMLA Conference in Birmingham. For that conference, Ocasio coordinated a plenary panel on López's work to raise awareness of her voice as an emerging and important one in Latinx literature. Our resulting panel of four papers was a preliminary attempt to expand the available scholarship on her work, since very little exists currently. At her plenary address following the panel, López read her short story "The Landscape," and by the end of that reading, the excitement among her audience members was electric. We hope to continue the spark generated at that gathering with this special issue of *SAR* on her writings.

During our work on this volume, we grappled with several issues worth noting here, since they have influenced the final product. These issues came to light particularly through the comments of our dedicated peer reviewers, whom we enthusiastically thank for their insights. These reviewers illuminated some of the challenges for those engaging in scholarship on this author at this time, including the dearth of prior critical attention to her work, her insistence on not being categorized solely by her Latinx background (even as she acknowledges her debt to and support of Latinx literary legacies), and her complex treatment of feminism. Consideration of these issues is especially cogent for scholarship on López's work as she is both a fiction writer and a theorist; an understanding of her oeuvre requires exploration of the ways these two roles inform one another in her work. In supporting this special issue, *SAR* is fueling the dialogue around this important writer.

Critical Attention

Since her publication of *Soy La Avon Lady and Other Stories* in 2002, López has generated a considerable body of fiction, including four novels and two short story collections. Yet, despite recognition of her

literary prowess by the Miguel Mármol Prize for Fiction, The Writers' League of Texas Book Award, and the Pen/Faulkner Award—for which *Homicide Survivors Picnic* was a finalist—López's fiction has received surprisingly scant scholarly attention. Aside from Tanya Long Bennett's 2008 *Eureka* article, "Soy La Postmodern American Chicana? Lorraine López's Identity Play in *Soy La Avon Lady and Other Stories*," only two other articles on López's fiction and an interview with the author have appeared to date in peer-reviewed publications. This initial scholarship has confirmed the significance of López's work, but it has also highlighted the need for further research into her fiction to fully excavate its meanings.

Plowing the ground for such study in "Four Latina/o Writers of the Ghost South," Maria DeGuzman praises López's adept use of "ghosting techniques" (467) in her stories, techniques by which, according to DeGuzman, "the spirits of the absent and/or the deceased materialize and function as agents" (467). DeGuzman's observation is a provocative one, offered as support for her overarching argument that the four authors discussed in the essay utilize ghosting techniques to reveal the unique agency of marginalized Southern populations. She notes that these populations "have been treated not as legends, but as 'traces' of legends, both as fixed caricatures and as ghosts, as less than socially full-bodied members of the South as region and of the United States as nation and trans-nation" (456). DeGuzman asserts, referencing *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* and several of López's short stories, that the author's "spooks . . . [convey] the ways in which Latina/os in and beyond the U.S. South have been and continue to be mis-recognized, unrecognized, dis-located from an empathetic community, and are struggling to make a place for themselves" (469).

In "'Snapshots from the Mother Road': Travel and Motherhood in Lorraine López's *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*," Cristina Herrera draws similar conclusions, stating that for the Gabaldón sisters, "[t]raveling on the 'Mother Road' (Route 66) . . . functions as a metaphor for the daughters' strong desire to discover who Fermina (their long-time caretaker) really is, which in turn will appease the endless longing they have for their mother, a major source of their Chicano identity" (3-4). Both DeGuzman's and Herrera's studies assert López's noteworthy contribution to Latinx literature and to the exploration of identity politics, particularly in the U.S. South and Southwest. David P. Wiseman's interview with López, published in *Afro-Hispanic Review* in 2009, focuses on cultural identity and politics, as well. Exploring with López the evolution of Latino letters since the late nineteenth century, Wiseman invites the author's perspective on "the foundations of Latino literature and her projections for its future" (141). To this end, he inquires about

López's literary influences and her goals and challenges in employing the Spanish language in her stories.

As these early investigations reveal, López addresses the rich gifts of Latinx cultures, including the "musicality" of the Spanish language (Wiseman 145). Further, her stories explore the challenges of living, as opposed to simply surviving, in a world dominated by restrictive social ideologies and plagued by personal alienation. Yet, as this issue's contributors consistently point out, López combines elements from an array of literary traditions with her own vision to produce fiction that surprises, purposefully dodging and subverting reader expectations. Among a wide variety of literary influences, she names Latinx writers such as Judith Ortiz Cofer, Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, and Cristina García, as well as Anglo writers such as Jane Austen, E.M. Forster, and Barbara Pym. Reflecting her fiction's complicated relationship to Latinx traditions, she states, "If I write a work that validates assumptions, generalizations, or stereotypes, then what am I doing but endorsing lazy, unimaginative thinking?" (López qtd. in Wiseman 145). Better understanding of the complexity and power of López's fiction demands close analysis of individual works in context of not only Latinx literature, but also through a broader aesthetic and philosophical lens.

Latina Positioning Deflected

Understandably, several of our peer-reviewers raised the issue of whether essay-submitters should more intentionally frame their interpretations of López's works within Chicana and Latinx literary theory. As DeGuzman, Herrera, and Wiseman evidence, it is important to consider her writing through those lenses to understand the context in which she writes. Tanya Long Bennett's essay on *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* and Cameron Crawford's study of *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*, both included in this issue, certainly employ theory regarding Latinx identities and narrative strategies commonly used to explore them. Yet, as is evidenced by this issue's contents, including the articles by Bennett and Crawford, López's work eludes interpretation when read through any single theoretical framework, including current theories associated with Latinx studies. We feel that understanding of López's work calls for a more flexible approach.

López herself has expressed that narrow categorization can be problematic for artists. In her 2011 essay "When We Were Spanish," she admits, "As a writer, I have found that the limitations imposed by my ethnic identity complicate artistic production" (Falconer 43). In the

essay, she describes an experience of her heritage that belies standard notions of ethnicity, particularly in a culture where she "rarely encountered representations that informed my quest for cultural identity in a helpful way" (Falconer 41). She struggles with her identity not only as a Latinx: "Early on, I decided I did not want to be defined in a limited way, and I had no desire to lose opportunities because of this" (Falconer 41), but also as a female: "Nothing in my experience of the world convinced me that one sex was entitled to dominate another. No male I encountered exhibited judgment I deemed worthy of preempting my own" (Falconer 42). In a 2016 interview with Teresa Dovalpage for *Latino Rebels,* López again chafes against being defined by others according to categories of culture. Acknowledging the diplomacy that one reviewer exercised in ultimately arguing *The Darling* "did not conform to the reviewer's expectations for Latino/a literature," López still asserts, albeit in a nominative clause, "that writers of any ethnicity should be free to write the kind of literature they choose, without performing culture to satisfy the mainstream reader's preconceptions."

Like Ortiz Cofer, López has negotiated the challenge that many Latinas face in order to carve out personal identity, free from the distinctions that others would assign. In fact, she depicts this struggle so powerfully in *The Darling* that the reader must resist the temptation to see Caridad's struggle as that of "every-woman" striving to find her own identity in cultures dominated by males.

Gender Theory and Complex Humans

In addition to pressing submitting scholars to consider López's relationship to Latinx studies, our reviewers asked whether her fiction ought to be framed more overtly by feminist theory. Certainly, the treatment of gender in López's fiction calls for consideration through that lens. Yet, even with the multiplicity of feminist theories, or feminisms, available to scholars for such purposes, López again resists categorization; she wants to be free to investigate human behavior, combining both compassion and honesty in her work.

At times, López's narratives seem to insist on a third-wave kind of pluralism. Several of her stories feature transvestite characters, for example, who play out dances common in her fictional worlds, in which love and affection partner with insecurity and pettiness to produce unintended damage. Caridad's lover Gray in *The Darling* illustrates the reasons third wave feminists avoid essential gender definitions and the policies dependent on them. Although Caridad is hurt by Gray's initial dishonesty about his gender identity and performance, she comes

to understand his deep-seated desires and the shame he experiences around them, and appreciates that he remains, through it all, devoted to her and her son. Similarly, Molly of "Soy La Avon Lady" generates a strong sympathy in readers, even (or especially) when she unwittingly attracts the advances of a man who thinks she is a man dressed as a woman. When he finds she is actually a female and dumps her on the side of the road, far from home, she feels degraded and humiliated, but his terrible treatment of her cannot be neatly diagnosed through a feminist lens. Sophia's vulnerability seems to be that of being human in an often hostile world.

Similarly, as Tanya Bennett notes in her article on *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories*, Caridad Bausch of "Batterers" demands a re-evaluation of contemporary feminist politics. Her colleague Ellis invites her to speak to his support group for domestic abusers because she has been a victim of battering in the past. But rather than fulfilling Ellis's expectations and confirming the guilt Ellis wants the men to feel, she tells of her own manipulation of her abusive husband to get him arrested and put in jail. Here, as in "Human Services," López focuses not on the man who uses his power unethically over a woman for gain, but on the woman's complicity in a strange and complex dynamic of dysfunction.

López's characters inhabit a liminal space between, or among, various competing ideologies, which becomes a new center, or identity. If critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Lisa A. Flores identify living in the borders as having one foot in two worlds, López's characters are more likely to live in the intersection of many worlds. Unless those characters have as many feet as some Hindu gods have arms, it may be easier to describe them as embodying intersectionality.

López's characters are not trapped by their liminal spaces; they create identities that allow them to find a path forward (sooner or later, depending on the story). Ellie D. Hernández offers a warning for those who would reject any form of idealism in Chicana feminism, arguing that "we should not conflate the essentialism and universality of institutions and nation-states and the abuses of male-dominated epistemologies with the insurrection of ideas and self-determinations of minority women" (62). López's characters often are put through the ringer—no utopian world there—but nonetheless move towards hope.

In doing so, her works challenge the type of moral relativism that allows one patriarchy to excuse another patriarchy's abuse of women and minorities on the grounds of cultural tradition. Being proud of one's culture can be positive, but it can also blur into a defense of the indefensible. In *The Realm of Hungry Spirits*, Marina's interest in Buddhism allows her to step outside the traditional masculine/fem-

inine roles common to many in Latinx culture, from which vantage point she can note how brainwashed both women and men can be by their traditional roles. The status quo is the enemy of progress.

As scholarship on the works of López moves forward, we must find ways to answer some of the questions that she addresses in her stories. How can minority groups find ways to circumvent the stereotypes that limit their voices? In lived experience, how does one reshape one's own corner of the world? How do we speak outside of the language of patriarchy? How can women reclaim the roles denied them both by the patriarchy and by earlier forms of feminism? Instead of waiting for the world to change, what can we do in our everyday lives to resist the forces that seek to silence us? One answer may not fit all situations; however, as the articles and reviews of this issue argue, López's fictional explorations offer provocative insights into our experiences in these complicated times.

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"I Loved to Cook, to Conjure Up My Mother's Fragrance": Food, Gender, and Identity in Lorraine López's *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*

Cameron Williams Crawford

Lorraine M. López's second novel, *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* (2008), traces moments in the lives of the four eponymous siblings—Bette, Loretta, Rita, and Sophia—following the untimely death of their mother. In the wake of their mother's death, the sisters feel a profound loss, feelings that are only compounded when Fermina, the family's caretaker and the sisters' substitute maternal figure, also passes away. Scholarship on López's fiction in general and *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* in particular is very limited; in what seems to be the only critical essay on the work, Cristina Herrera describes how the sisters, as they grow into adulthood, express an "overwhelming desire to learn more about their mother and the looming mystery of the 'gifts' bestowed upon them" by Fermina. Certainly, then, as Herrera suggests, the novel is centrally concerned with the sisters' "process of Chicana identity-construction" as the "daughters of their maternal figures" ("'Snapshots from the Mother Road'" 4, 2). As I argue, one of the foremost ways the sisters negotiate their cultural and individual identities is through food. López's novel is rife with descriptions of food and cooking, and notably, each sister has her own unique relationship with food. Loretta, for example, "loved to cook," and "the aroma of corn masa, fresh cilantro, and lime" reminds her of her mother (103); for Sophia, on the other hand—the youngest Gabaldón sister who binges on American convenience foods and subsequently struggles with her weight—food is a complicated issue.

As Meredith E. Abarca and Nieves Pascual Soler write in their introduction to *Rethinking Chicana/o Literature through Food: Postnational Appetites*, "The omission of food in the process of theorizing about identity formation reflects a tendency that assumes that food merely represents culture rather than being a medium that also maintains, shapes, and recreates culture" (2). The connection between food and identity is certainly not unique to Latin American culture. What is distinctive is the long and fraught history behind the establishment of a distinct Mexican cultural identity, which involved the Spanish con-

quest of the Americas in the sixteenth century and the ensuing eradication of the Aztec empire. According to Jeffrey M. Pilcher, the clash of these "two vastly different cultures with equally distinct culinary traditions" ultimately led to the emergence, in the mid-twentieth century, of a national *mestizo* cuisine "that combined Indian corn tortillas with European wheat bread" (*¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 3). Pilcher suggests that this cuisine is central to the formation of Mexican identity. Notably, Pilcher also credits women with creating mestizo cuisine. The tradition of Latinx women's food writing emerges from this history and thus highlights the central role of food in the lives and cultural identity of Latinx women. By placing *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* within the tradition of Latinx women's food writing, this essay examines the role of food in López's novel as a tool of Chicana cultural identity formation—figured as a connection to the mother—and individual self-expression. I argue that the sisters use food and cooking to connect with their mother and thereby to understand their identity as Chicanas. This in turn allows them—by also using food as their medium of self-expression—to forge their own paths to individual selfhood. In this way, I suggest, the novel therefore articulates a need to create space for cultural identities beyond what Heather Salter calls "the psychological boundaries of a nation" (46), and particularly that accommodate non-essentialist experiences of gender and sexuality.

To better interrogate the discourse of food in *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*, particularly as relates to issues of culture and identity, it is important to first situate López's text within critical discussions that outline ways of understanding how Latinx women writers deploy the discourse of food as a means of investigating issues of representation, such as gender and sexuality. Food—specifically the act of cooking—is highly gendered in Mexican culture (as it undoubtedly is in others); in an essay on Denise Chávez's *A Taco Testimony*, Herrera recalls how her mother refused to teach her how to cook as "one way of shielding me from her experiences, where family and culture dictated that the eldest daughter in a Mexican family must dutifully learn how to make tortillas, rice and beans, the basis for all Mexican meals" ("'Delfina, ¡mas tacos!'" 242). Indeed, the kitchen itself is typically perceived as a "woman's place," and an oppressive one at that. Yet, for many Latinx women, the kitchen is a space of freedom and creativity. Abarca and Pascual Soler's definitive study of "food consciousness as a theoretical paradigm" traces this association in the history of Latinx women's food writing as far back as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century nun credited with the development of Mexican literature. In Cruz's work, they find a "proliferation of descriptions of the kitchen as a locus of identity and of cooking as a repository of knowledge" (12). Abarca

and Pascual Soler furthermore point to Tey Diana Rebolledo's *Women Singing in the Snow*, wherein she refers to "writers as cooks," in order to demonstrate how "the voices of Chicana writers, in stories and theories alike, arise from the creative context of the kitchen":

> Vehemently [Rebolledo] argues . . . 'that one way to express individual subjectivity (while at the same time connecting to the collective community) is by reinforcing this female identity as someone who cooks.' It is food that gives identity to Latin American women: 'While we cut the onion, we wept, but as we peeled the artificial layers superimposed on our identity as a Latin American woman, we were finding a center. So there, take the frying pan by the handle and stew,' claim Patricia González and Eliana Ortega in *La sartén por el mango*. (13)

Similarly, in "*Mexicanas'* Food Voice and Differential Consciousness in the San Luis Valley of Colorado," Carole Counihan uses "a food-centered life history methodology"—*testimonios*—to explore how food is a meaningful form of self-expression, particularly for Latinx women. She observes how their memories, dishes, and their cooking and eating rituals are used to "communicate powerful meanings and emotions" (174). In the work of Latinx women writers, food is often used to explore the "deep and elaborate constructions of the self" (Freidensohn 174), and it is intrinsically connected to issues of representation and expressions of identity.

For this reason, for many Latinx women writers, food is more than personal; it is also highly politicized. When the kitchen is reinscribed as a space of freedom and creativity, then it becomes a site of resistance. In *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women*, Abarca describes a series of culinary chats, or *charlas culinarias*, that she conducted with Mexican and Chicana working-class women. "With the *charlas culinarias*," Abarca explains, "the personal *becomes* political" (5, italics in original). The chats reveal how these women "symbolically and/or literally transform the ideologies embedded in the construction of the kitchen as their *place* into their own social *space*"; that space is an empowering one that allows them to challenge cultural expectations of women's obligatory labor and reclaim "multiple changing levels and degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity, and agency" (19-20, italics in original). Abarca's study is especially significant as it gives voice to the lived experiences of working-class Mexican and Mexican American women, an otherwise marginalized group that has "historically been silenced through gendered, sexualized and racialized modes

of power both in the United States and Mexico"; for Latinx women, "[c]ooking their native foods and sharing (oral) recipes may thus serve as a resistance to colonization and a subsequent reimagination or re-invention of a culture that has been stripped from them" (Herrera, "'Delfina, ¡mas tacos!'" 248). Food is particularly significant for Latinx women in that it enables them to resist more than gendered, patriarchal oppression, but also colonial oppression, subverting power structures and reaffirming the value of their cultural identity.

López's *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* intersects with this tradition of Latinx women's writing in the way the sisters use food and cooking to negotiate their cultural identity formation as Chicanas and as a pivotal part of their individual self-expression. Importantly, as Herrera reminds us, the sisters' mother is "a major source of their Chicana identity" ("'Snapshots from the Mother Road'" 4); therefore, in order to analyze the central role food plays in the sisters' processes of identity construction, it is necessary to contextualize how the sisters associate their mother with food. The overwhelming majority of the sisters' many shared memories of their mother revolve around food in some way. One such example is Loretta's tenth birthday "dog party" in 1966 (to which she invites only dogs from the neighborhood), her first birthday celebration since her mother's death. Loretta comments on the oddity of watching her father prepare for her dog (and a few select human) guests to arrive: she describes how he "bought a bakery cake, a burro-shaped piñata, bags of Tootsie Rolls and butterscotch disks with which to fill the donkey"; yet, in spite of his best efforts, Loretta can't help but think it "strange" to see her father boiling "wienies on the stove so early that morning that they now bobbed in the cold salty water like bloated fingers, odd to watch his hairy-knuckled hands measuring jelly beans into pleated candy cups" (9). The scene is incongruous to Loretta because these tasks were typically completed by her mother. Most importantly, as Loretta notes, instead of a store-bought cake, Mama would bake and ice her daughters' birthday cakes from scratch. The other siblings' memories of Mama also reveal a meaningful connection between their mother and food. Cary, the only male child in the family, fondly remembers how Mama "made the best food" (81). Bette remembers how their mother sometimes "burned the meat, scorched the beans" (81). The many shared memories of Mama are important because they reveal the sisters' deep desire to know their mother. Without that knowledge, they feel lost in their searches for selfhood and disconnected from their Chicana roots. They share these memories of eating their mother's cooking to know her, to connect with her, but also to discover themselves. These memories are therefore doubly significant in that

they illuminate how the sisters look to food to "maintain, shape, and recreate" their cultural and self-identities.

While food plays a significant role in the cultural identity formation and self-expression of all the Gabaldón sisters, it is Loretta who most pointedly connects Mama and cooking to her own identity. In a chapter that takes place in 1971, Loretta reminisces about her mother and remarks: "Her scent also stays with me, the aroma of corn masa, fresh cilantro, and lime. Food smells, warm smells. I loved to cook, to conjure up my mother's fragrance" (103). Loretta admittedly cooks to remember her mother, often by replicating many of the same dishes her mother used to prepare. The types of food Loretta cooks are therefore especially significant, as they at once reflect and shape her Chicana identity. To Loretta, Mama smells like corn masa, cilantro, and lime, three food items that are ubiquitous in much of Mexican cuisine. Corn masa and lime (mineral lime, that is, not the citrus) are the two traditional ingredients in tortillas, a staple of the Mexican diet and also of the Gabaldón household. Tortillas are a recurring image in the novel, a particular food item that appears throughout the narrative that every sister consumes at one point or another: Loretta makes them herself and serves them with arroz con pollo; Bette cuts them up, fries them, and serves them with mashed avocado; Sophia "smuggl[es] buttered tortillas into bed" (134); Rita "cracks apart . . . frozen tortillas with a butter knife" (164). Tortillas are more than a staple of Mexican diet; as Paula E. Morton explains in *Tortillas: A Cultural History*, they carry a complex symbolic weight and signify across discourses of race, gender, and culture. Morton writes: "The history of the tortilla is a tale of the powerful intersections of people, customs, and culinary traditions that continues to lift generations and cultures" (xiii). The tortilla is an emblem of Mexican heritage, "the bread of life . . . a reflection of the connections between Mesoamericans around 2,500 years ago and today's international tortilla marketplace" (xiii). The tortilla most powerfully links Loretta—all of the Gabaldón sisters—to her Chicana identity, connects her to her mother and to the generations of women for whom "converting corn into tortillas was part of [their] education" (xiv). Through making and consuming tortillas, Loretta and her sisters reimagine or reinvent their identity as part of "a culture that has been stripped from them" (Herrera, "'Delfina, ¡mas tacos!'" 248).

Yet, traditional Mexican foods are not all Loretta cooks; with as much zeal, she prepares dishes like pork roast and French toast. These foods represent the hybrid nature of Loretta's identity as Chicana, or Mexican American, a daughter of Mexican parents born and raised in America. They are also dishes similar to those she remembers her mother cooking, like "roast beef, beans, and mashed potatoes," that

blend Mexican staples such as beans with cuisine more commonly considered American (161). Loretta seemingly strikes a bicultural balance between these aspects of her identity, at least as reflected in her relationship with food. Beyond her preferences in the kitchen, her other food choices suggest the ways these elements of her heritage collectively inform her cultural identity. In addition to tortillas and avocados, she grows up loving pickles and hot dogs and snacking on bags of potato chips. The types of food Loretta cooks are important, as they at once reflect and shape her cultural identity.

Loretta's certain way with animals (the "gift" she believes was bestowed on her by her other maternal figure, Fermina), a central component of her self-identity, intersects with her love of cooking. Loretta associates her mother with food, which she relates to her qualities of nurturing and caretaking, and this association plays a role in Loretta's decision to become a veterinarian. Loretta prepares food for stray dogs in the neighborhood, cares for abandoned pigeon chicks by giving them "rice cereal with an eyedropper" (15), and feeds "hardboiled egg whites, cottage cheese, nuts and vegetables with plenty of flaxseed oil" to Vincent, the foul-mouthed parrot she inherits from Mr. O'Toole (109). Cooking is a form of self-expression for Loretta that aids in her special ability to care for animals; it therefore plays a part not only in how she negotiates her cultural identity, but in how she understands her own individual self-identity as a veterinarian. For Loretta in particular, cooking forms a central part of her path to selfhood, is essential to her process of self-identity construction.

While Loretta has nurturing qualities, expressed through her career choice as veterinarian and her place in the kitchen space as primary cook in the family, those qualities do not limit her or restrict her in any conventional way. Indeed, Loretta resists normative gender roles and heteronormative practices, using food and cooking to do so. In Loretta's love of cooking is an act of rebellion. One of the foremost ways she challenges assumptions about "traditional" Latinx women can be seen in her expressions of sexuality, descriptions of which often rely on the discourse of food. In one example, Loretta associates her longing for her love interest, Chris, with a sensation of hunger, of feeling at once "overfull" and yet "empty" at the same time. During a stop on the sisters' road trip from California to New Mexico—where they plan to meet Heidi Marie Schultz Vigil, the Works Progress Administration data collector who interviewed Fermina in 1938—Loretta declares she will "never swallow another bite of green chili" as long as she lives. But that "overfull" feeling gives way to emptiness in a gift shop where Loretta thinks of Chris and momentarily ponders, "What do you bring someone who has given you your first kiss, when you hope it will not be your

only kiss? How about a hooded sweatshirt with a chili appliqué?" (258). Only at the end of the novel is it revealed that Chris is a woman. The image of the chili here resonates symbolically. As Pilcher explains in an essay on Mexican-American cuisine, the chile—or chili, as Loretta calls it—is "the soul of Mexican cuisine" ("Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex" 8). Loretta associates the chili with Chris, attaching the image of this traditional Mexican food item and symbol of her Chicana identity to her same-sex desire. Here, the discourse of food is used to explore Loretta's identity as a lesbian. When the other sisters finally meet Chris, they are surprised, but ultimately approving, embracing Loretta's queer identity at Cary's wedding reception. For the sisters, the act of cooking and eating brings comfort and nurturing, qualities that are too easily pigeonholed as essentialist or are stereotypically gendered in their association with women, but the novel resists depicting any of the sisters as one-dimensional in their identities as Latinx women. They are fully formed, complex women with desires and frustrations. *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* uses food to communicate the sisters' complex identities, allows them to explore the "deep and elaborate constructions of the self" and to break down the "real and imagined barriers" of their Latinx identity (Freidensohn 174).

Like Loretta, Bette—the oldest Gabaldón sibling—relies on food and cooking as a way to connect to her mother and thereby her Chicana cultural identity. As is also true for Loretta, the tortilla serves as a symbolic food item through which Bette is able to accomplish this. In one especially telling chapter, Bette moves to a neighborhood in L.A. with a vibrant Latin American population and bustling marketplace where she enjoys "the citric tang emanating from fruit bins until stench from the fish stalls overpowers it. Underlying this, though, is the mealy aroma of fresh corn tortillas. With my mild buzz, nothing is as seductive as a steamy tortilla de maíz, butter-glazed and drizzled with lime juice" (265). There is another echo here of Mama's scent as Loretta describes it—"the aroma of corn masa, fresh cilantro, and lime." Bette's neighborhood is so rich in Latin American culture that Bette remarks, "Rita asks when I'm going to move back to the United States" (264). Both the neighborhood and Grand Central Market represent Bette's effort to surround herself with food items that are reminders of her mother and her Chicana identity.

Bette looks to Mama, a wife and mother, as an example of traditional Chicana womanhood. It is a role Bette seemingly hopes to emulate as she takes on the role of surrogate maternal figure, particularly as she grows older and becomes the first sister to get married and have her own child. Shortly after she marries Luis, Bette claims, "I am the woman of the house, a real person with bills and everything. [. . .] I

couldn't be happier" (131). This is a crucial part of her self-identity; like Mama, Bette takes on the role of wife and mother, and central to this identity is food and cooking. Although Bette cooks regularly and takes pride in her identity as wife and mother, she rejects traditional gender norms that would limit her to these roles. Instead, Bette asserts her own individual self-identity, using food as her medium. Bette, it should be noted, is *not* a good cook. Sophia refers to Bette's meat as "charred" and her potatoes as "leathery" (176); Loretta similarly complains about Bette's oats being "thick as paste and peppered with scorched bits" (94). Bette also tends to favor convenience foods. Her chapter from 1974 contains a lengthy and humorous discussion of "the potato conflict": her future mother-in-law wants to serve instant potatoes at Bette's wedding, while Tía Nilda—their father's sister, who serves as the siblings' surrogate maternal figure, one through whom they can be reminded of their mother—"wants to peel a thousand potatoes herself, bubble them up in a cauldron, and cream the pulp by hand, preferably with a bent fork" (114). As far as Bette sees it, Nilda's way—the traditional way—"is hard work and makes no sense" (114). This is one example of how Bette is not opposed to challenging conventions. Food is an expression of Bette's individual self-identity, a means through which to reject the patriarchal expectations foisted on her.

Both older sisters use food and cooking to connect to their mother and thereby as a means of negotiating their Chicana identity. Sophia, the youngest sister, who was only a toddler when her mother died, connects with Mama through overeating. As the youngest of the sisters, Sophia has no memories of her own about her mother; what she knows she's pieced together from the stories her older siblings have told over the years. Presumably, Sophia has no memories of her mother's cooking. In a chapter that takes place in 1968, a young Sophia asks her siblings, "Tell me about Mama. What was she like?" (81). Loretta tells Sophia about Mama's expert ability to make cakes and cookies, remembering with a particular affection how she loved her lemon pie. Shortly after this discussion, Sophia finds herself hungry: "It's all that talk about Mama's baking and lemon pie, but the truth is there's always a yawning feeling in your stomach" (82). Sophia here associates this insatiable hunger with the talk of her mother's cakes and pies, desserts she herself does not remember tasting. Sophia's desire to know her mother is indicated by her hunger, that "yawning feeling" that can never be satiated. This example also illustrates the way Sophia uses the second person "you" to refer to herself, a habit that, "combined with her tendency to overeat, would suggest a pattern of emotional distance, perhaps to spare herself the pain of longing for a mother she never knew" (Herrera, "'Snapshots from the Mother Road'" 15).

This distance Sophia feels from her mother signifies a distance from her cultural identity. Although there are few foods that Sophia *doesn't* eat, despite how largely unappetizing they may sound—pimento loaf sandwiches (82), "pancakes and runny eggs" from Denny's, even taquitos from the cafeteria "with guacamole . . . as thin as gruel and a shade of green that suggests some level of radioactivity" (137)—her food choices largely reflect the extent to which she is the most disconnected from her mother and, therefore, her Chicana identity. While Sophia eats Loretta's home cooking whenever she's presented with the opportunity, the overwhelming majority of the food she consumes is processed or fast food, and much of it is of the typical "American" variety: Wonder bread, Velveeta, fast-food burgers "nested in steamy buns, slathered with chili, and topped with warm pickle slices," or "oily" French fries (149) are but a few examples. In fact, at one point, she describes her own body by comparing it to a mini-mart, a type of store that traffics in pre-packaged, processed, convenience foods. If her partner Harold's body is a temple, she remarks, "yours must be . . . a squat concrete square, shelves bulging with canned Vienna sausage, Cheese Nips, Fig Newtons, Tab . . . and cases and cases of Metrecal" (176). While Loretta and Bette seek a balance between their Mexican and American influences as reflected in their food choices, Sophia's obsession with mass-produced, pre-packaged "American" convenience foods indicates a lost connection to her Chicana identity. Sophia does not outright reject this identity; however, her "American" food preferences reveal the extent to which she embraces American culture. There is something else to be said about Sophia's food choices as pertains to her self-identity; equating herself to a mini-mart, which suggests a detachment from her own body, further evidences the extent to which she herself has become a product of American convenience culture.

Yet, in embracing the American part of her cultural identity through food, Sophia asserts her own individual identity, one that separates her from her sisters. This is emphasized further when considering Sophia's unique food choices and role as consumer of food. In these choices is a subtle act of resistance. Traditionally, women are cast in the role of cooks "rather than . . . as eaters," a role tied directly to patriarchal systems that

> enforce women's static place as nurturers and loving providers of food within the domestic setting, in contrast to men's 'right' to mobility and as the recipients, not preparers, of food. Yet what emerges from feminist food scholarship are ways women may renegotiate their supposed 'place' in the kitchen by using this site as a space to critique and challenge confining gender

> roles within a patriarchal structure, ultimately providing for women an opportunity to engage in self-formation. (Herrera, "'Delfina, ¡mas tacos!'" 246)

Sophia as a consumer, overeater, of American food challenges limiting assumptions about Latinx women and monolithic ways of understanding cultural subjectivities. Sophia is a character who undoubtedly struggles in her process of self-identity formation, but this small step is part of the process nonetheless. Through her food choices, Sophia carves out space for her own unique self.

Whereas Sophia overeats, Rita hardly seems to eat at all. Her chapters contain the fewest descriptions of food. If food is the way the sisters connect to their mother and, in so doing, negotiate their identity as Chicanas, then Rita's chapters suggest the ways she feels a complete detachment from her mother/Chicana roots. Rita's chapters are also narrated in the third person, indicating a removal of self, of being identity-less. In point of fact, Rita seems to feel disconnected not just from her mother, but from her entire family. Her first chapter, notably titled "Cursed and Cast Out," speaks to Rita's sense of isolation. In this chapter, readers learn that Rita is enrolled in the first grade at Sacred Heart Elementary in September of 1967. She should have started first grade the previous year, "but in the confused time after her mother's death and Fermina's long illness, no one bothered enrolling her in school, so Rita stayed home an extra year with Sophie" (72). We also learn that Rita is a quiet child who "don't talk a whole lot," according to her father, "She used to talk more, but these days she's pretty quiet" (73). This sense of isolation is reflected in her eating patterns (or lack thereof). The few moments wherein Rita does eat are therefore telling. While her other siblings remember Mama's cakes, cookies, and pies, Rita doesn't like sweets (202). Food is such an important thing in the Gabaldón family—through the acts of eating and cooking, as well as through the discourse of food, the siblings recreate memories of their mother and, in the process, bond with one another and forge their individual identities. Yet, Rita approaches food with a kind of caution; in one example, Rita "examines" a piece of toast "as if to pick out flaws before deciding where to bite" (215). Rita also tends to eat by herself, especially while volunteering for the corps. There, she stashes away her small stipend to later "treat herself to a movie at the discounted matinee price and buy herself a burger afterward" (198). Nicknamed "Lonely Girl" by the other staffers, Rita frequently "arrives at the canteen early for breakfast, hoping to eat alone" (201). In these examples, the discourse of food is used to reflect Rita's struggle to negotiate her Chicana and individual identity.

Yet, there are a couple of important food scenes that serve as pivotal moments on Rita's journey to self-discovery. One moment occurs when, after sharing a meal of hamburgers and milkshakes, Bette calls her Rita Panchita. Rita is "floored" upon hearing this long-forgotten pet name and immediately "conjures her mother—big and beaming—on a sunny morning calling her indoors," and it leaves her "wishing so hard that she'd asked her sister to take her home that it hurts as though she's taken a blow to her chest, aching like bruised ribs and a sore heart" (217). Here, as Herrera observes, "Bette re-creates and re-inserts this memory for Rita, and in so doing, she instills in her younger sister the means in which to speak the longing she has for her long-dead mother" ("'Snapshots from the Mother Road'" 17). Herrera's assessment can also perhaps be used to illuminate the second pivotal moment, which occurs in 1983 when the sisters travel to Río Puerco, New Mexico and eat Thanksgiving dinner at Tía Nilda's house in July. Nilda prepares a feast of "turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, piñon and green chili stuffing, empanadas, calabazas casserole, pumpkin pie, and pastelitos," and Rita makes a point to "eat second helpings of everything to assure her it's all perfect" (252). The Thanksgiving dinner Nilda prepares comprises a blend of Mexican and traditional American dishes, much like the food Mama used to prepare, and therefore represents a way for the sisters to connect to their Chicana identity. Rita, who never seems to eat at all, eats two helpings, which demonstrates her first real effort to connect with her mother and thusly explore her Chicana identity. It is therefore significant that this Thanksgiving in July occurs during a chapter titled "Snapshots from the Mother Road." In it, the sisters embark on a road trip from their home in California to New Mexico, where they plan to meet Heidi Marie Schultz Vigil. As Herrera notes, the trip "functions as a metaphor for the daughters' strong desire to discover who Fermina really is, which in turn will appease the endless longing they have for their mother, a major source of their Chicana identity" (3-4). For Rita, the Thanksgiving dinner is another stop along this metaphorical journey to connect with her mother. While Rita may not be as assured of her individuality as her sisters, or be as strong in her identity, this is an important (if small) step. To know themselves, the sisters must know their mother, their roots. Rita's food choices, her eating habits, and the discourse of food in Rita's chapters are therefore nonetheless tied to her self-expression.

Food plays an important role in the lives of all the gifted Gabaldón sisters. Through it, the sisters find ways to connect with the mother they miss so desperately, allowing them to explore their identity as Chicanas and enabling them on their paths to individual selfhood. *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* uses food as "a significant voice of self-expres-

sion," a means by which the sisters "communicate powerful meanings and emotions," and a medium through which they "maintain, shape, and recreate culture." For the sisters, food is an important tool of individual expression, a way through which they carve out space for their own cultural identities. Through the discourse of food in *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*, López gives us women who are flawed, complex, messy, and dynamic, women who don't fit neatly into boxes. In this way, López's novel taps into the tradition of Latinx women's food writing in powerful ways. Considering *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* within the tradition of Latinx women's writing about food and cooking as a fundamental part of identity formation can therefore not only help us to better understand López's fiction, but can also illuminate the many and varied uses of food in Latinx literature as a means of rethinking essentialist notions of Latinx subjectivities.

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To Tell What Is True: The Short Story as Stark Mirror in Lorraine López's *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories*

Tanya Long Bennett

In Lorraine M. López's story "Women Speak," instructor Lucinda Aragon sits in a college classroom listening—evaluation sheet in hand—to her remedial English students' class presentations. Prepared to be underwhelmed, Lucinda nonetheless finds herself profoundly moved by the presentation of one of her students, Nadezhda. As Nadezhda frames her message with an overview of the twentieth-century Romanian-born American artist Hedda Sterne, she points out that unlike her own paintings, Sterne's work was shaped by her belief that she "was only one small speck, hardly an atom, in the uninterrupted flux of the world around me" (López, *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* 205). Although Nadezhda appreciates Sterne's art, she attributes Sterne's relative obscurity to the view of herself as a "small speck," and Nadezhda resolves to express her own identity more boldly in her painting. This student presentation shocks Lucinda partly because it is coherent and intellectually stimulating, but more importantly, it offers her an unexpected reflection of herself, jolting her into a sense that, if she is to achieve a life of any real value, she must move beyond her own passivity and push toward her desires, "one choppy step after another" (209).

Art is often considered as a mirror of sorts, *good* art reflecting its audience in ways that challenge false self-images conceived and maintained out of fear and insecurity. López's fiction takes up the task of removing flattering veils from our mirrors so we can see a truer reflection of ourselves. Although this reflection can be ugly and disturbing, López's stories imply that contemplating the image in all its complexity is necessary for a fulfilling life. The unremittingly tragic tone of López's 2009 *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* may strike some readers as unnecessarily morose, but close analysis of the collection reveals that it is this sinister tone that gives the stories their power. In narratives that illuminate humanity with all its wounds and warts, López resists the temptation to comfort her reader by providing resolu-

tion to the conflicts her characters face. This approach spurs readers to re-evaluate their own pursuits of a worthwhile life. With the weight of tragedy in their favor, López's stories push us toward an appreciation of pain as well as of its role in our cultivation of a flourishing life, that is, a life which, in its entirety, is characterized by not only moments of joy, but also complex experience and meaningful relationships.

This study explores López's keen use of mirror metaphor in *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* to overcome shallow and crippling notions of happiness perpetuated by reductive twenty-first century social ideologies. Rejecting a romanticized perspective, López illuminates the tragic arc of human existence, and tragedy's perhaps surprisingly crucial role in our growth. As is common in Latinx fiction, the characters of her novels and short stories struggle to establish authentic and empowered identities in an environment that privileges English-speaking, white, economically advantaged males. Yet, López's growing oeuvre is driven fundamentally by philosophical questions such as "What is right action?" and "What is the purpose of life?" With great poignancy, she responds to such enduring questions. *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* utilizes an extended mirror metaphor to illuminate the necessity of tragic narrative for reaching understanding as well as happiness in its expanded definition. It may seem that in taking this approach to López's fiction, I am privileging the notion of universal experience over socio-cultural factors, but I intend no such thing. As a twenty-first century Latinx writer raised in the American Southwest and working in the U.S. South, López writes from her distinct experience. The stories of *Homicide Survivors Picnic* resist formalist interpretations that would reduce them to universal themes, ignoring the challenges her characters face in being female, transgender, adolescent, elderly, of cultural minority, and/or economically disadvantaged. However, even in their unique struggles, López's characters do navigate universal questions, and while the answers to those questions are rendered only tentatively, if at all, her fiction emphasizes the benefit of the navigation process itself, particularly the navigation of pain and its potential to stimulate growth.

Although contemporary writers tend to take great liberties with the longstanding conventions of tragedy established by the Greeks, tragedy persists as a fundamental undercurrent of the human narrative. In *Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy*, Gregory A. Staley discusses Aristotle's emphasis on the form as *mimesis*, and as a vehicle for "catharsis of pity and fear" (4). Staley recognizes Stoic philosopher Seneca (who lived from 4 BC to 65 AD and was heavily influenced by Aristotle) as the primary source of Renaissance tragedy, which in turn strongly impacts contemporary ideas and uses of tragedy. According to Staley, Seneca,

unlike his fellow Stoics who taught virtue primarily through allegory, considered tragedy as a "just and lively" investigation of human passions, of emotions and even madness generated by the cognitive processes (8). In his understanding of poetry's power to arouse emotion in service of a noble life, Seneca aligns not only with Aristotle but also with Longinus, who emphasized in *On the Sublime* the importance of drawing the reader into the poet's vision through vivid images and "dignified expression" (Part VIII). Countering Plato's doubts about poetry's power to ennoble, Longinus argues, "That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable" (Part I). Staley notes that, consistent with Longinus's regard for literature that "tears everything up like a whirlwind" (Longinus, "On Sublimity," *Classical Literary Criticism* 144), Seneca employs tragedy to elicit the emotional response necessary for engaging the audience member *comprehensively*, and this process promotes development toward a flourishing life.

The tragic arc of human experience provides the basic shape for López's stories, developing the notion that tragedy and happiness are two sides of the same coin. In the process, her fiction forwards an expanded definition of happiness itself. The idea that happiness is most usefully defined as a complex concept, as more than just enjoyment or pleasure, is not a new one. All major religions probe the role of happiness in life and/or the afterlife, as do philosophy and psychology. The issue is investigated by philosophers as far-flung as Confucius and Zhuangzi, Aristotle and Plato (sixth to fourth centuries BCE), Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries); and psychologists such as Jung (1933), Maslow (1970), and Ryff (1989).[1] In the twentieth century, we have seen a world-wide surge of interest in happiness as a desired "product" of cultural conditions and political policy. Bhutan's influence in urging the United Nations to adopt a "happiness resolution" in 2011 is only one example of the contemporary concern with questions of whether people should be happy, and what happiness is (Huppert). Analysis of *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* through the tragedy/happiness lens yields significant insight into the meaning of López's work.

Clearly, the collection does not employ tragedy in its most ritualistic sense—to honor Dionysus through a narrowly scripted sequence of dramatic elements. The collection does not progress from order to chaos and back to order, as classical tragedy would do. In fact, the collection does not even generate catharsis in an identifiable way. Yet, López's insistence on poetics as a process for investigating truth, and in particular *pain*, draws meaningfully from the genre. Notably, the strange and at times absurd quality of López's stories is generated by

her juxtaposition of tragic themes with comedic elements. Through humor, she lures her readers into gazing at the unembellished reflection that we so often avoid, one complex and difficult, yet characterized by truth, or something closer to it than we like to consider. Going well beyond "funny," her stories suggest that this glimpse at our disturbing selves is the first step toward authentic and meaningful experience.

Without catharsis or clear moral lessons, readers may wonder, what is the payoff for braving the realm of the tragic? The power of the disturbing undercurrent in López's fiction can be understood by further considering the uneasy but inextricable relationship between tragedy and happiness. Vivasvan Soni offers fascinating insights on this point in *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*. Soni asserts that happiness is the central question of human existence, and in making this argument, he elaborates meticulously on the definition of happiness employed in making his case, specifically a "nonmathematizable" (14) one derived from the proverb attributed to Solon, of sixth century BC Greece: "Call no man happy until he is dead" (qtd. in Soni 27). To clarify the concept Soni employs, he references the term *eudaimonia*, (31), translations of which include "'human flourishing,' 'goodness,' 'human good,' and 'the good life'" (31). Soni employs this Solonian notion of happiness, rather than one reduced to merely its ethical aspect (30) or one anticipated "beyond this world" (29), because the Solonian version emphasizes the quality of the *whole* life, rather than selected elements of a life, and because Solon's concept of happiness is contingent on death. Soni refers to Martin Heidegger's *Being in Time* to clarify this point, reiterating Heidegger's assertion that "it is only the imminence of death that gives rise to reflection on happiness" (Soni 74).

Soni's discussion of happiness is useful here in part because it reminds us that tragedy and happiness are integrated rather than disparate. As an alternative to generating cathartic release from suffering and anxiety, tragic narrative can trace the pursuit of happiness through the continued difficulties of living. While the conflicts experienced by López's characters are ongoing, her protagonists *are* compelled by a desire for fulfillment, and along the way, if they are lucky, they are confronted with disturbing reflections of themselves that complicate their experience and make fulfillment possible. These encounters create the possibility for a flourishing life. Hence, Soni's suggestion that all human experience is in some sense tragic applies well to López's fictional world.

López's employment of the mirror as a vehicle for self-knowledge taps into psychologists' long-held fascination with self-reflection. Her use of this metaphor is illuminated by a brief look at two recent studies

on the mirror as a literary device. Jenijoy La Belle's 1988 *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* updates Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's theories of human development, drawing on the work of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Patricia Meyer Spacks. Analyzing a number of literary works by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western writers, La Belle argues for the female mirror-gaze as an act of agency rather than an indication of passive objectivity, as Freud suggested. La Belle emphasizes the importance of the mirror-gazer's *contemplation* of herself in such moments, simultaneously perceiving and creating as she "distinguishes herself from others of her species and situates herself in relation to those other selves" (3). Applying La Belle's argument along with history of Chicana "mirroring and masking," Laura Gutiérrez Spencer asserts that for many Chicana writers, the mirror is "a powerful tool of gynocentric perception" by which the female gazer wrests subjectivity from the patriarchal gaze, becoming both "beholder and beheld" (72). Spencer emphasizes that this process is an important one for Chicanas engaging in "the development of an ethnic and personal identity" on the margins of "modern United States society" (70). I would argue that the stark mirror offers liberation not only from objectification but also from one's own self-delusions, both of which hinder growth toward a flourishing life. The protagonists of *Homicide Survivors Picnic* are challenged to engage in honest and painful self-discovery, and as La Belle and Spencer argue, mirrors can play an important role in that process.

To initiate growth, López's characters must first transcend false notions of themselves. False realities plague the characters of *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* to reveal that "the good life" is impossible without authentic and disturbing reflection. The two interwoven stories that frame the collection, "The Flood" and "The Landscape," illustrate this point to great effect. Lydia, protagonist of both stories, initially lacks an authentic reflection of herself that would enable her to engage more meaningfully with life. Although early on she retreats from life's more difficult challenges, on some level preferring the safety of isolation and self-deception, she senses that oversimplified portrayals of life fall short. She has temporarily taken custody of Roxanne, the four-year-old daughter of her cousin Shirley, ostensibly until Shirley can get her legal affairs in order following a drug arrest. Lydia is strongly drawn to Roxanne, whose "dark legs are strong, well-muscled as she skips ahead and trots back to Lydia bearing found treasures" (29), but she is not sure she is up to the challenge of a full commitment to the child, should it be necessary. Although she has brought Roxanne on a short vacation to Paducah, Kentucky, she considers asking Roxanne's grandmother, Ida, to take the girl for the long-term. In response to

Roxanne's plea to come into the hotel pool with her, Lydia concedes with dread: "I can't do this, Lydia tells herself. There's no way. [. . .] No, she's not a pool person, not an outdoorsy type, either, and except for managing her students and attracting the men she likes to pick up, she's not much of a people person or even a pet person, for that matter. And she's definitely not what anyone would call a kid person" (21). Even the relationship with her boyfriend Matt is uncertain: Before the trip, "they'd argued—Lydia and Matt—over something as trivial as song lyrics, and he was then uninvited" (12). When she and Roxanne visit the River Heritage Museum, the girl asks her to identify the image of a "humorless" looking man in a mural. Lydia reads about the deceased and relatively unrecognized figure, Alben Barkley, from the legend, explaining that he "[s]erved under Harry S. Truman as vice president" (15). Roxanne tires of the explanation before Lydia can even finish, and Lydia, worn down by Roxanne's constant questions and demands, succumbs to the child's interrupting request for something to drink. A couple of mornings later, exhausted and uncertain about her ability to keep up with Roxanne, she feels sick. "At the sight of her bloated face and puffy eyes in the bathroom mirror that morning, [she] murmured, 'Alben Barkley, I presume'" (29). While Lydia might consider herself "happy" for having reached professional milestones or during fleeting sexual affairs, happiness in the fuller sense—the kind generated by a flourishing life—evades her. Like Lydia, many of López's characters are hampered in their quest for happiness by false images that threaten to trap them in reticence and passivity and, hence, prevent them from growing and developing toward a full and "good" life.

Homicide Survivors Picnic explores the complication of false images in several other stories as well. For example, in the title story, fourteen-year-old Ted suffers from intense adolescent self-consciousness and confusion. To stave off the headaches and self-loathing that result, he masks himself in various ways and works hard to keep a low profile. His sister's boyfriend Terrell was murdered several weeks before, and to support the pregnant Tina, Ted and his mother have agreed to attend a homicide survivors picnic with her. In the car on the way to the picnic, he wears his mother's sunglasses, enjoying the "sight of his reflection in the rearview mirror" in which he looks like a "fourteen-year-old boy version" of "Jackie O" (87), the glamorized image of himself a welcomed illusion. His return home to Georgia after a summer visit to his father in California has left him feeling like a "fly trapped in a giant sweaty fist" (91). Irritated by the contradictions between his mother's words and actions, Ted "wonder[s] what would happen if people weren't allowed to speak unless they said what they meant. He imagined a delicious silence unfurling like a beach blanket on a sun-warmed sand"

(98). The sunglasses buffer his exposure to harsh reality, which, like the "midday sun" causes migraines that "flatten" him, "as though he were a cartoon character felled by a falling safe or piano" (90).

Despite his avoidance techniques, however, he cannot be always on guard. On the way home from the picnic, Tina tells their mother to stop the car so she can "chuck" (102), and Ted follows his sister, wanting to help. Comforting Tina as best he can, he is struck with a startling possibility, that she might have been in some way responsible for Terrell's death. As he struggles to wrap his mind around Tina's complicated experience, she ties Terrell's bandana across her eyes and bolts across the highway's traffic to the median, ostensibly to prove something to herself about her feelings for Terrell. Torn between staying on the "safe" side of the road or following his sister, Ted feels that the only escape from this "sweaty fist" is to "plunge," "eyes shut" (107), imagining that "anywhere but Georgia or California" might offer an escape from the burden of "be[ing] the one to love [his mother and sister] more than they bothered to love themselves" (107). While Ted's "plunge" is a bold leap beyond the comparative safety of childhood, we are left to consider whether or not he has glimpsed the clear reflection of himself necessary for the journey toward a flourishing life. Ted's youth and the pressure of his circumstances certainly pose challenges, the understanding and benefit of which would require fortitude, time, and perhaps luck.

Mona, of "The Imam of Auburn," has fallen into the trap of false reality, as well, unprepared for the unmitigated truth of her own reflection. She works for a mental health agency but suffers, herself, from paranoia and confusion. Her conflicting desires to both expose and protect the imam of a local mosque parallel her split sense of who she should be. Having interviewed Muslim women from the community to determine whether they have been victims of domestic abuse, she understands their hesitation to put their husbands at risk, though she finds it infuriating. Considering divorce herself, Mona waffles between self-preservation and loyalty to her husband. She tends to change shape as situations demand, and as a result, experiences a significantly unstable sense of self in an environment that seems ever-threatening. When she looks into the mirror of a makeup compact, "[h]er moist breath fogs the reflective disc, but the condensation shrinks away, forming the shape of two Caribbean islands: one kidney-shaped and the other a tiny speck" (126). Neither these foggy shapes nor her own distorted image offer any help to Mona, who has "problems with perception" (127). She blames her husband for her disorientation: "He wants me to believe what I think is wrong, what I see is false. He's trying to change reality this way. [. . .] So it suits him, like a distorted mirror that makes him seem taller and stronger than he really is" (118). Mona's "craziness" is

a result, at least in part, of her husband's desire for an idealized image of himself, a desire so strong that he manipulates her into "mirroring" the false reflection for him. But Mona's failure to escape the charade, her inability to see the full image of herself as a result, is a key factor in her stalled progress.

In "Batterers," "prevention resources" (129) agent Ellis is, like Mona's husband, clinging to a deceptive notion of himself, and tends to cast others in roles that help him sustain this admirable self-image. Ellis works during the day at a human services agency and on the side he "facilitate[s] weekly antiviolence sessions for a small group of men who were ordered to attend as a condition of release from jail time on domestic assault charges" (130-131). Although this story does not feature *mirrors* to represent self-reflection, Ellis's colorblindness suggests that he, like Mona, has "problems with perception" (127); he acknowledges to his colleague Caridad Bausch that "I see light and darkness, shades, that's all" (136). His track record with relationships reveals that his blindness affects more than just his ability to recognize the color of Caridad's blouse. When he mentions to his lawyer-sister that he has invited Caridad to speak to his "batterers" group because "[s]he's had some history of domestic violence" (132), his sister does not believe his claim that his interest in Caridad is not romantic: "You're in trouble, my brother, and you don't even know it" (133). Although he does know it, on some level, his assumptions about Caridad are based on a shallow understanding not only of her but also of the dynamics of domestic violence. At the "batterers" meeting, when it is her turn to speak, Caridad surprises Ellis by explaining to his group that when her abusive ex-husband went a step too far, calling her terrible names in front of her children, she formed a plan that would lead to his arrest, and she carefully executed the plan to achieve the desired result. Upset that Caridad has subverted the recovery narrative he has been creating for the group—that real men (as opposed to boys) must "[take] responsibility and [own] up" (151) to their decisions and actions, he asks her why she said "that stuff" (151). Ellis's narrative is based on the image of women as innocents, "like gods or angels" (148), Caridad notes. She calmly calls out Ellis for this romanticized perspective: "I thought you would want me to tell what is true, what I know" (151).

Confirming that Ellis's false narrative leads to a dead end, "batterer" group member Lavender Howell is arrested before Ellis can bring the meeting to a coherent conclusion, Lavender's girlfriend having been discovered dead in the house that she and Lavender rented. Facing arrest, Lavender expresses confusion and disappointment in Ellis's methods, which he trusted to guide him into a new life. "I thought it would end different than this" (149), he says just before surrendering

himself to the police. Like so many of López's characters, Ellis is offered an opportunity for real growth in this moment of disruption. To confront an authentic reflection of himself would afford him a chance at development toward the flourishing life. Yet, his impulse to kiss Caridad in spite of his irritation with her suggests that, as his sister seems to understand, his tendency to default to a romantic narrative thwarts the possibility of his fulfillment.

Rita Portillo of "Human Services" and Daisuke of "This Gifting" are hampered, as well, by false images. Rita imagines herself a near-saint, like "her namesake, Santa Rita of Cascia" (158); considering herself "blessed by virtue" (158), Rita practices "gentl[e]" (155) acts such as allowing her ex-husband Beto to live in her duplex even when he is late with the rent. Rita's idealized view of herself prevents recognition of her poisonous self-righteousness, a quality that enables Beto's juvenile existence, and thus preserves her sense of power in the relationship. When her apartment floods as the result of a worn-out hot water heater, the plumber unwittingly offers her a keen reflection of herself: "See, your soft water—sounds all nice and gentle, huh?—but it contains these caustic substances. This creates corrosion, and that just eats away at the tank from the inside" (166). Rita holds tight to her repressed anger and frustration, however, preferring inner corrosion to a frank look at herself.

Daisuke is blinded by a desire for self-righteousness and control, as well. Although he strives to keep his debts to others paid in order to avoid being "obligated" (211), interactions with his American English teacher, who provides him with extra tutoring, threaten to swamp him in a sea of mutual obligation. His parents' lessons of "gifting," based on a strict accounting of "give and take," rule his sense of self-respect: "[W]hile Daisuke toweled his short black hair in the mirror, his father's spirit stood at his elbow in the cramped and steamy bathroom cubicle. *You must take teacher some small gift*, the older man said" (212). Having gambled away his textbook money at pachinko, Daisuke plans with renewed fervor to right his accounts by bringing Miss Yolanda a square of silk in exchange for her tutorial. After assisting him with his paper, Miss Yolanda surprisingly asks him to give her a ride to the jail to see her daughter Felicia, and there, Daisuke's simple system of justice becomes complicated beyond repair. Although his service in providing Miss Yolanda with transportation is a gift in itself, he witnesses at the jail the lopsided U.S. justice system, in which black people seem terribly disadvantaged. His original gift of silk now seems too simple for maintaining any semblance of balance in the world. Even after he is finally able to give his teacher the square of silk, he "felt heavier somehow, more encumbered than ever. [. . .] His lungs constricted

from the pressure of all this gifting, and it was hard for him to draw a deep breath" (235). Yet, he is unable, even in this moment of potential growth, to let go of his justice-based notion of relationships. Instead of recognizing and accepting the chaos that inevitably accompanies real living, he seeks a renewed sense of order, conjuring up the "spirits" of his parents who offer simple advice to "[s]low down [. . . a]nd look where you are going" (235).

The only route toward a flourishing life, the collection asserts, is to accept pain and tragedy as a crucial aspect of a full and meaningful life. To this end, López recommends the stark mirror. While humans instinctively dislike and seek to avoid pain, López suggests that denying it is dangerous. Authentic reflections can be a safeguard against the crippling effect of this instinct. By the end of the opening story, "The Flood," Lydia is poised to grow: Despite her inability to recognize herself in the mirror, she senses that romanticized versions of reality are stultifying. Even in her most cowardly moments, Lydia recognizes that little Roxanne, "observant and shrewd" (30), is spurring her to growth. Reading the inscriptions on the commemorative bricks leading to Paducah's National Quilt Museum, Lydia is put off by their sentimentality: "She can't help feeling this kind of emotion is too facile and cheap—there's no struggle reflected here. It's a lie to say only half of what's true" (31). This conscious recognition of how sugar-coated "truths" can stunt one's growth is a turning point for Lydia.

In "Sugar Boots," Leo's final decision to let go of his youth and take up the role of "Mama" to his "step-grandchildren" Beau and Cassie introduces the possibility for flourishing. At thirty-six years old, Leo is still clinging to his dream of landing a part in a popular television show. When he first met his wife Stella, "He had tried out for the part of the macho Latino neighbor" (51) on *The Benjamins*, the show for which Stella writes. He did not get the part, but Stella's kindness to him that day had been the beginning for them. Stella is older than he, and his sisters see the marriage as another sign of Leo's perpetual childishness. Unaware that he is listening nearby, his sister Beatriz says, "He's always been spoiled, such a baby. Seriously, didn't Mama have to, like, die before he could leave home, before he could get married?" (41) Like Sugar Boots, Leo and Stella's cat, Leo has been feeling the panic of losing attention to Stella's grandchildren. Embarrassed to be called "Grandpa" (44), he has resisted the role of caretaker, despite his sympathy for Micki, Stella's daughter, who is serving time for murdering her abusive husband, Derrick. Stressed by the challenge of caring for the children and the cat while Stella is at work, Leo "shuffles upstairs" upon Stella's arrival home and "cocoons himself in the comforter, passive and queasy" (50).

But after a particularly tough day, during which Sugar Boots is discovered to have a tumor and is "put [. . .] to sleep" (55), and Beau temporarily becomes lost in the grocery store, Leo acts courageously and steps across the threshold toward growth. When Stella and Cassie finally locate Beau, the toddler "twists free [. . .] and runs toward Leo. 'Mama,' he says, pumping his arms as he begs to be lifted. 'Mama, Mama!'" (59). Rather than turn away from this parental image of himself as he has in the past, Leo decides to explain to the children that Sugar Boots has been euthanized, facing the reality of mortality himself, as well: "Leo lumbers to his feet [. . .] as if from underwater, from a deep sea that disgorges artificially flavored conch and scallop husks, [. . .] a busy ocean of things purporting to be what they are not, the murky, flimflam depths of it. Maybe he *can* do this" (60). Recognizing himself in the stark mirror and accepting that pain is necessary for a meaningful existence, Leo moves toward flourishing.

Stewart, in "The Threat of Peace," also breaks out of his oversimplified notion of self and reality toward the possibility of growth. Like Leo, Stewart has been participating in life from the sidelines, as a legal mediator and the boyfriend of the beautiful and resilient Guadalupe Apodaca, mother of teenagers Delia and Connie. Structured according to principles of mediation, the story ultimately chafes against the boundaries of its subtitled sections: Empathy, Patience, Active Listening, Conflict Style, Communication, Negotiation, Reality Checking, and Common Ground. If Stewart hopes, early in the story, to counterbalance Guadalupe's tendency to "fac[e] opposition" with "pure exhilaration" (68), he has learned, by the end of the story, that his mediation methods are no match for life's twists and turns, especially when riding with Guadalupe. He acknowledges the truth in her statement that "peace, people getting along and whatnot [. . .] can be disastrous for someone like [Stewart]" (84) for whom disputes mean job security. Yet he insists that "I don't take sides. [. . .] I'm neutral" (67). He tries to order Guadalupe's finances and makes quasi-critical comments about her parenting practices, which he judges as too permissive. When her ex-husband Anders arrives at the house to pick up his belongings, however, Stewart realizes that he will not succeed in organizing Guadalupe, who learns from each husband and lover and emerges from breakups even stronger than before.

> Stewart leans in on his elbows, pursing his lips and nodding with [Guadalupe and Lavonne, their neighbor], when he glimpses his own face reflected in the kitchen window, which is odd because the kitchen light hasn't been switched on, so as to illuminate his image in the glass. He reaches for his glasses.

> It is Anders holding up a cracked and plaster-spattered tool. His mouth moves. 'What happens to me now?' he seems to be saying. (85)

Startled into awareness by this "reflection," Stewart realizes that he will not be able to mediate his way through this situation: "[I]n a moment in which he will later—much later—take immense pride (though he will have no one to share this with for a long time), Stewart steps over the threshold and out into the stinging cold" (86). Resisting the temptation to cling to the oversimplified categories that have offered him comfort against the uncertainties of life heretofore, Stewart initiates a new kind of existence.

López's message about the power of authentic reflection culminates with the collection's final story, "The Landscape," in which Lydia, months after her Kentucky vacation with Roxanne, is now making another journey—this time to take Roxanne back to her unpredictable mother Shirley. As Lydia's now-husband Matt drives them from Tennessee to Georgia, she tells Roxanne a ghost story to keep the child entertained. The ghost story centers on a terrible, ugly painting that so disturbs the house-sitter/protagonist of the tale that she moves it to the basement to avoid looking at it. After several terrifying days during which the painting mysteriously appears again and again in its place above the mantel, and each time must be returned to the basement, the sitter is confronted by the house's owners, who have returned from their vacation. Registering the bare spot over their mantel, they ask, "What happened to our mirror?" (243) The tale's clincher, revealing that the hag in the "painting" was a reflection of the house-sitter herself, emphasizes the character's failure to recognize her own terrible image in the mirror. The ghost story, a metafictional mirror for Lydia and for the reader, portrays in simple terms the common human tendency to be disturbed by and hence to avoid the truth. Such behavior costs the ghost-tale's house-sitter some sleepless nights and perhaps future business at this address, but on a philosophical level, there is much more at stake.

Expanding the metafictional effect of Lydia's ghost story, and further clarifying the rocky path to a flourishing life, is a landscape painting Lydia and Matt have brought along on the Georgia trip to have appraised by Matt's art dealing aunt, Belinda, once they drop off Roxanne. Although it makes sense to combine the two tasks into a single trip, for the already-upset Lydia the picture inspires dread: "It was a landscape [. . .], a shadowy rendering of some body of water—a swamp?—surrounded by morbid-looking trees under a dull sky. A feeble light emanated from the center, but the darkness threatened to overtake

this as surely as death punctuated life" (255). After having delivered Roxanne, then taken the painting to Aunt Belinda—who appraised it at "five or six hundred dollars" (256)—and finally begun the journey home to Nashville, Lydia's aversion to the painting becomes so strong that, while Matt is in a rest stop bathroom, she stealthily discards the gloomy landscape next to a drinking fountain. Like the ghost story's mirror, however, the landscape cannot be so easily gotten rid of. An elderly couple retrieves it and follows them to a gas station, having gone out of their way to do a good deed and return the painting to Lydia and Matt.

As the story and the collection draw to a close, the painting sits in Lydia's basement where Matt has stowed it to appease her. Her own ghost tale lurking in the background of this episode, Lydia likely knows that she will not be able to escape the gloomily painted reflection of her world. Even with the painting in the basement, the stark self-image haunts her: "The night was moonless, deep and dark. Lydia started, catching sight of her reflection in the living room window as she moved about the house tidying up. She looked like a hologram image in the shadowy glass, like a wraith" (263). After their return home, Roxanne called and asked, "[W]hen are you going to pick me up?" (263) For now Lydia resists dealing with the pain of losing Roxanne and snuggles with Matt on the couch, watching a movie, but her understanding of life's tragic arc is growing, and she is beginning to see that it is central to deep experience. "[The movie] followed a complex plot—full of twists and turns, betrayal and reconciliation and more betrayal. It was a love story that ended in a tragic way. Lydia had seen it before, but watched it again with the comforting satisfaction that at least she knew how this one would play out in the end" (263). Lydia's experience, learning to say "yes" to Roxanne, even in the face of inevitable heartbreak, recalls the reader to an earlier moment in "The Landscape," when Lydia and Matt passed a terrible accident on the highway on their way home from Georgia: "Lydia caught sight of a mangled gray sedan, the front end smashed accordion-style nearly into the backseat. 'Surely, no one survived that.' 'But they did.' Matt pointed out an ashen-faced man and woman, wearing blankets and holding onto one another, as they perched on the median divider" (258-259). Such moments suggest not only that we can often survive the "wrecks" of our experience, but that they are *necessary* to developing depth and understanding.

In context of López's fictional universe, what does the flourishing life look like? Her stories often end ambiguously, leaving readers to wonder what will happen next for the protagonists, as well as to gaze at our own stark reflections. López's characters are not traditionally heroic; they are sometimes not even likable. Like Flannery O'Connor,

López employs the grotesque for its ability to shock us into sensibility. Often unsympathetic, her characters exhibit distasteful qualities, both physical and behavioral. Comparing López to O'Connor, DeGuzmán notes López's combination of "the astute, unflinching observation of human behavior characteristic of O'Connor" with elements of the grotesque and a distinct "Gothic lyricism" (467). Yet, unlike in O'Connor's stories, redemption is not waiting beyond the physical world of López's fiction. In this case, what *is* the "flourishing" López asks us to consider? Wiseman notes, in his review of the collection, that "the world of *Homicide Survivors Picnic* is relentlessly situational. As López turns perceived notions of right and wrong on their heads, readers and characters are simultaneously decentered. Reality, in other words, ceases to be a set standard, as it becomes as personal as the circumstances that each character encounters" (238). Wiseman's comments reinforce the point that in López's fictional world, the flourishing life is not to be achieved by following a set of rules, but instead demands an arduous process of growth—cognitive, moral, and emotional. And such growth depends upon recognition of the whole self.

Paralleling the ghost-tale mirror from "The Landscape," the painting of *Homicide*'s final story offers not transcendence, but a truer, unmitigated reflection of Lydia than she has been heretofore willing to face. López suggests that gazing at the stark image enriches Lydia. At the end of the story, even with the heartache of losing Roxanne, she recognizes that the time she had with Roxanne was intense and meaningful—perhaps sublime: "[N]o one looked at her the way Roxanne did—the intensity of that attention missed now like a phantom limb" (261). Sitting on the couch with Matt at her home in Nashville, longing terribly for the child, Lydia is, López suggests, flourishing because she is at last considering the whole of herself.

The flourishing life, in context of López's stories, seems to require risky and difficult, even if temporary, relationships with one another. The reward for pain is the sense that one is alive, and not sunk into a comfortable numbness. This kind of happiness is characterized by courage as well as understanding—the ability to see connections where none were visible before. And, perhaps most significantly, the flourishing life generates and is generated by the ability to recognize and preserve the integrity of the self, even as one risks heartbreak. *Homicide Survivors Picnic* utilizes the mirror metaphor powerfully to reveal the complex path open to López's characters, and the collection itself ultimately serves as an unembellished mirror, offered to readers for their own contemplation of a flourishing life. The collection conveys clearly the importance of authentic and disturbing stories, reminding us that the tragic narrative arc of human existence, though often

purposefully ignored, can guide us toward meaningful experience and understanding.

Notes

1. For a thorough exploration of these figures and their contributions to the "happiness" discussion, see *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (2013), edited by Susan A. David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers.

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Good Woman versus Good Person: Resisting Stereotypes in Lorraine M. López's *The Realm of Hungry Spirits*

Laura J. Getty

The question of what makes a good woman is a central concern for Marina Lucero, the protagonist in Lorraine M. López's *The Realm of Hungry Spirits* (2011). Historically, the definition of a "good woman" carries with it a weight of cultural assumptions: not just about what a woman should or should not be, but rather more specifically about what a woman should or should not do. The question is, who benefits from the definition in each case? The question is not meant to be coy; on the contrary, it is one of many questions to ask about the depiction of women in literature. For movies, the Bechdel test asks whether a film has two female characters who have a conversation about something other than a man.[1] In retrospect, the fact that so many films fail to depict women as anything other than an extension of the male characters should not have come as a shock—the evidence was there all along, after all—but cultural assumptions about what is "normal" only exist because few people stop and question the underlying philosophy. Of course, any feminist discussions of how women are defined take place within the confines of patriarchal society; how, then, can an author redefine behavior without resorting to the metaphorical realm of science fiction, on another planet with new rules? *The Realm of Hungry Spirits* performs just such a high wire act, walking the line between the patriarchal society that the protagonist clearly inhabits and her rejection of the ideologies that would privilege male considerations over her own.

Deborah L. Madsen summarizes Gloria Anzaldúa's writings on how patriarchal assumptions about women underlie traditional Mexican society:

> Anzaldúa links the enforced silence of Chicanas within traditional Chicano culture with the expression of feminine sexuality. The reason why women must be silent is part of a broader cultural imperative that women seek invisibility and a denial of their being. In this resides the fundamental misogyny of traditional Mexican society. The Church, the family, the cul-

> ture require that women be subservient to men, that women renounce themselves in favor of men. Selflessness and humility define the "good" woman; "bad" women, in contrast, are selfish and value their own selves, to which they give expression. (25)

The expression of feminine sexuality is often linked to sexual purity. While a host of negative words exist for sexually active women, one would be hard pressed to find a negative name for a sexually active man.[2] There is no positive vocabulary, in fact, to describe women who are sexually active and/or unmarried, although the contrary exists. Madsen notes that the control of women's sexuality exercised by the Catholic Church and traditional Mexican families "forms the basis of Chicana criticism of the Chicano movement" (29). The ubiquitous dichotomy between the virtuous woman (with the Virgin Mary as the archetype) and the whore (with Eve as the archetype) leaves little room for realistic depictions of women as full-fledged human beings; this dichotomy is ingrained into culture and difficult to stamp out, as many women can still confirm.[3] Chicano archetypes for women include the same contrast between *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, the patron saint of the Americas, and *La Malinche*, based on the story of Doña Marina, the interpreter for the conquistador Hernán Cortés. Doña Marina helped Cortés in his conquests, bore him an illegitimate son, and was later married off to one of his men. Although Doña Marina was often considered a traitor, more recent writers have noted that she was sold to Cortés and had little say in the events that followed. In a story that mentions *La Malinche* indirectly (as a description of a neighbor, Carlotta), the main character is interestingly named Marina. This Marina has had a difficult life, but she makes a conscious decision to improve herself and her circumstances: a type of re-appropriation of the archetypal figure.

Despite this specific re-appropriation, Marina's strongest expression of her selfhood is to decide what being a Latina means to her. To call this action subversive is to privilege one way of fighting patriarchy over another; to insist that actions should respond only to the status quo—to archetypes within patriarchal culture—is to risk missed opportunities to think outside the box. As López argues, "writers of any ethnicity should be free to write the kind of literature they choose, without performing culture to satisfy the mainstream reader's preconceptions" ("An Interview").[4] Marina's interest in Buddhism circumvents one type of preconception about Latinx culture, while the novel's clear ties to Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, a work decidedly outside mainstream Latinx culture, challenge Western paradigms about good women.

The novel posits the argument that one way around patriarchal culture is, ironically, to plow right through it: to have a protagonist who ignores those definitions—by not giving them voice, by not self-identifying with the vocabulary of patriarchy, even when others label her that way. These lacunae in the text add to the story's pathos, since the reader knows how patriarchal society would judge Marina's situation, while witnessing first-hand how unfair those judgments would be. Marina is attempting to define a "good woman" by going outside of cultural norms, recognizing that the answer cannot be defined by the unrealistic expectations for women's behavior in the various communities around her. When confronted by negative accusations and patriarchal vocabulary, Marina's strategies are to reframe the words, reject their meaning and/or relevance to her situation, laugh at them, or just ignore them entirely. The answers do not come easily, and her situation is not idyllic, to put it mildly. Over the course of the novel, Marina takes a hard look at what it means to be good in the context of her own growth as a full-fledged human being, in all of its messy and imperfect glory.

The Struggle for Inner Peace

In her quest for her own definition of goodness, Marina grapples with how to find inner peace while surrounded by chaos. Marina teaches English as a Second Language in middle school, in California's San Fernando Valley, but the majority of the action revolves around Marina's home life. She experienced a painful break-up with her long-time boyfriend before the story begins, and she has been trying to focus on herself: who she is, and who she wants to be. Her house is overflowing with the people she has taken in, including her nephew Kiko (who was kicked out by his mother and her boyfriend—mostly the boyfriend), her sister Xochi's ex-boyfriend Reggie (who took the breakup really, really badly), and her neighbor Carlotta (whose husband abuses her). When Marina finally does manage to get them to move out, she ends up with more guests by the end of the novel, including Kiko again, plus her ex-boyfriend's daughter Letty, and Letty's father Miguel. Marina struggles with the strain of helping so many people, especially when they often are ungrateful. Nonetheless, she is disappointed with herself when she (justifiably) loses her temper, since her goal is to be as peaceful as possible when dealing with others. She is struggling to create her own definition of what it means to be a good person—and what it means to be a family—and she has high expectations for herself.

An important aspect of her search for inner peace is that Marina is not trying to change herself through a type of spiritual rebirth, but rather through a type of spiritual cleansing: letting go of the negative instead of becoming a different person. The title of the book refers to a Buddhist rebirth realm, which would seem to indicate that the character is being reborn; however, the original title of the novel was *Limpieza*, which means "cleaning" or "cleansing." The publishers insisted instead that the title should be *The Realm of Hungry Spirits*.[5] There is a direct mention of that particular Buddhist realm in the book, but the story begins and ends with references to a formal *limpieza* ceremony (which will be discussed later). Marina wants to become the best version of herself: accepting the foundation of who she is rather than looking to satisfy those around her who want her to be someone else.

What makes Marina impressive is how she demonstrates that one's circumstances do not need to be ideal for a strong definition of a good woman to work. Her life is messy at best, heartbreaking at worst. Kiko and Reggie are sleeping on her couches in the living room, and Letty's baby son dies of a congenital heart condition soon after the novel begins. She is surrounded by people who misunderstand her actions and attempt to manipulate her. Marina survives in part because of her attitude: she wants to help, but she has learned the hard way not to allow anyone to control her actions. She is far from perfect—she swears, gets angry, and says things that she regrets—but she is trying to be a better person. When she makes mistakes, she learns from them, especially when it involves judging people unfairly (123). She helps people, but she has rules, including that houseguests should at least tidy up after themselves rather than just watch television all day. Perhaps most importantly, she does not allow anyone else to define her, although negative comments still have the power to hurt her. For Marina, "good" is a higher category, above selfish interests and concerns.

Marina's determination to rise above her problems (she pictures spirituality at one point as a platform onto which she can physically haul herself up) does not change her circumstances, but rather her perception of them. Both the novel and Marina use humor as a coping strategy; in the fight against power structures, laughter has long been known to be a powerful weapon.[6] Marina participates in what Ellie D. Hernández has identified as a Chicana feminism that believes in progress, or what Hernández calls the "future perfect construction" in language, which she notes may sound "unbearably utopian, [but] in reality signals a progressive move forward in time" (65). In particular, feminism must not "fear positive ideas about ourselves to appease the theoretical ordination of academic knowledge, which can be faulty and after all is intended to be a critique of dominant male culture" (63). The

postmodern world, with its distrust of essentialism and universalism, can run counter to "the practice of political difference [that] incites new ways of building paradigms to replace those that are not suitable or do not seem adequate" (62). In other words, scholarly criticism rarely celebrates the kind of positive progress sought by those who remain trapped by the status quo. The last word in *The Realm of Hungry Spirits* is "hope" (330): a future perfect construction for an imperfect world.

Religious (Self-)Definitions

As the novel begins, Marina has already begun her quest for inner peace and self-definition. However, she does not follow Roman Catholicism or its views on how a good woman should find serenity. Unlike her mother, who prayed in front of a plaster statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe when Marina was a child (185), Marina is considering becoming a Buddhist. Although raised a Catholic, Marina does not like Roman Catholicism's "wholly stupid male hierarchy, the infallibility of the pope nonsense, the bad-behaving priests, and the nuns, especially the nuns who took my mother from me" (210) since she had been told that her mother left to become a nun. When a nun in the elevator at the hospital tries to talk to her, Marina is annoyed that the nun assumes that she is "some kind of Christian, like most Latinas" (64), and she has to remind herself that it is not the nun's fault that her mother left. In Marina's life, the only statue of the Virgin Mother is in her neighbor Henry's yard, and it is accidentally blown off of its base by Henry with a leaf blower, shattering it (275-6). While watching her neighbors leave for church, Marina is annoyed by the loud bells from what she calls "Our Lady of Whatchamacallit" (51), and when Marina sees a crucifix around a girl's neck, she states,

> I marvel anew at the way that Christians blithely display artifacts commemorating the sadistic torture and murder of their founding leader. I mean, I know that Christ is supposed to have died for their sins and all that, but still, adorning oneself with his crucified body, doesn't that strike anyone but me as weird? (140)

Obviously, Marina does not seek inspiration in Christianity, which also means that she does not necessarily accept the Roman Catholic tradition of what it means to be a good woman. She resents the nun's assumption that she must be Catholic in part because it would define her behavior, making it impossible to step outside of the control exercised

by the Church and traditional patriarchal society over women. In fact, Marina rarely addresses gender in her self-analysis; she is trying to be a good person, who happens to be a woman. In her case, it is an act of defiance to focus on personhood, rather than womanhood.

Marina's choice to use male role models may not be deliberate, but that choice reinforces her refusal to see things exclusively from a gendered perspective. She appears to think that Buddhism may be more effective than Catholicism for her journey for several reasons. Although her mother's Catholicism was not enough to stop her father's abusive behavior, her father's use of Transcendental Meditation to change *his* behavior apparently made a difference (98). Marina found her spiritual guides, the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi, while reading books on spirituality, self-help guides, and biographies of non-violent leaders (17-18). To keep focused on her goals, she has a "framed black-and-white photo of Gandhi mounted near the towel rack" in her bathroom "as a reminder to be strong [and] peaceful" (24). In one of the funnier moments of someone misunderstanding Marina, Carlotta's sister Connie thinks that Marina was dumped by "that old guy," assuming that the picture means that Marina has "a thing for the senior citizen type" (95). Marina chooses Gandhi as a guide for his actions, in this case, rather than his religion (Hinduism), although there are obvious similarities (since the original Buddha was a Hindu prince). She is also trying to read the Dalai Lama's book *Awakening the Mind, Lightening the Heart*, but she finds it slow going (43). She reads small sections of the book at a time, usually when she is exhausted, and freely admits that she would rather reread her mystery novels: "Henry Rios, the gay Chicano lawyer who investigates crimes, has adventures that are way more riveting than the Dalai Lama's observations and insights" (184). When Marina is confronted by a frustrating or infuriating situation, she tries to use the Dalai Lama's recommendation about "cherishing ill-natured beings, viewing those who betray us as spiritual guides, and acting by force of generosity" (43). She also spends a certain amount of time in the novel imagining that the photo of Gandhi is judging her. Marina is afraid that she is the spiritual equivalent of a "tone-deaf listener at the symphony" (19), unable to comprehend the mysteries of spirituality. She is convinced that it is through spirituality that she will find what she calls "the wisdom necessary for the serenity I'm after" (18).

The attempt to use Buddhism is not without its problems, however. Not only does Marina find it difficult to finish the Dalai Lama's book, but she also has never met an actual Buddhist until she meets Carlos, a substitute teacher at her school. Her impressions of Buddhism have shaped her actions more than the reality of it. Carlos discusses a few of the many forms of Buddhism that exist, and he explains that some

Buddhists actually chant to receive material things, like a washing machine. This revelation disturbs Marina, as does Carlos's attempt at flattery, hinting that her presence in his apartment is the result of his chanting: "I take a step or two back, thinking I should feel flattered, but instead I'm kind of bothered by this. In fact, it makes me feel somewhat like a washing machine" (180). Her disappointment with certain aspects of Buddhism, including the materialism of some practitioners, comes in part from her extremely limited understanding of it; in fact, one of its initial draws was apparently because she did not think that she would "have to leave the house, much less pull on pantyhose" (51) to practice it.

The most important concept that Carlos introduces to her is *preta*, the realm of hungry spirits. As Carlos explains, "preta is the rebirth realm inhabited by hungry spirits that are constantly starved and thirsty, but they can't satisfy these needs on their own . . . I may be making assumptions here, but doesn't that sounds a little like your household?" (170). When Marina puts aside her initial irritation with this (not entirely unfair) comparison, she briefly follows the advice that Carlos implicitly gives her and decides to evict her houseguests for her own survival:

> Didn't he mention preta is a reincarnation realm? So will I have to *die* to be free? Irritation rises in my throat like bile. My thoughts churn darkly. But one crystalline and distinctly un-Buddhist insight penetrates this murk: I don't want to die for anyone, especially not this houseful of fools, until I have lived for myself. (190)

The empty house does not last for long, of course. By the end of the novel, Carlos appears to be pressuring her to do less for others at least in part to make her more available to him. Marina not only rejects his overall perspective, but also agrees to go out with her other potential love-interest, medical resident Art Ortiz, not long after Carlos hints that she should do less for the people she is helping. Art understands helping others (as a medical resident, he is exhausted from doing that day after day); in fact, one of the things that Marina and Art have in common is how much they like naps, rather than any interest in doing less for the people around them.

Since Marina takes in so many people who need help, her main goal is to find ways to be more patient with them. By using only parts of Buddhism, she manages to avoid (unknowingly, for the most part) the aspects that would make her journey more difficult. Rather than adopting the system wholesale, Marina creates her own version, which

allows her to continue to step outside of existing power structures. In particular, she makes sense of the Dalai Lama's words in the context of her own life, reminding herself to value the dignity of others, as well as remembering not to be so self-centered that she accidentally contributes to another person's misery. While her use of the Dalai Lama is frequently productive, Marina cannot escape the feeling that Gandhi disapproves of her most of the time, especially when she is unable to control her emotions. Despite her rejection of the authority of Catholic priests, she nonetheless worries that a religious man is judging her. She does realize, however, that both the Dalai Lama and Gandhi have not faced the same challenges that she does with her sisters: "In fact, I'll bet a huge part of the Dalai's ecstatic serenity is due to the fact that he's not related to Xochi, or Della, for that matter" (86). She reframes the issue in this way. Since the photo of Gandhi represents a projection of her own doubts and disappointment with her behavior, she is really responding to herself. What remains consistent about her use of these male spiritual guides is that they recommend behavior that has been coded as feminine by machismo culture: compassion for others, empathetic listening, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. They confirm for her that her values are not gendered—at least, not by everyone.

Despite Marina's fear that helping others can "look an awful lot like stupidity" (290), she continues to do so. Her sister Della finally points out that Marina already has the kind of spirituality, or belief, that she has thought she lacked; as Della puts it, "You have abundant faith in even the most hopeless people" (290). That faith seems to translate to other creatures, as well; when Marina adopts a dog to prevent it from being used in dog fighting, it is not really surprising that she buys a training book titled *No Bad Dogs* (233). Although she wants both peace and people, Marina finally recognizes that she will always choose people if she can have only one (329-330). Ironically, Marina's decision to choose people leads to a moment of inner peace as she stands by the window: helping others brings her peace. Since she finds herself in this way, she is rejecting the dichotomy that says that self-definition comes at the cost of helping people; although Marina clearly does not realize it, it is a perfect Buddhist moment. As the Dalai Lama writes, "Peace of mind or a calm state of mind is rooted in affection and compassion. There is a very high level of feeling and sensitivity there" (*Art of Happiness* 26). In other words, peace comes from helping others: from the compassion and affection that drive positive actions. It is also a moment where Marina has hope that the future will be better, embracing the "future perfect" attitude discussed by Hernández as part of twenty-first century Chicana feminism.

Good Woman versus Good Person

Of course, helping others has its limits; Marina notes that even the Dalai Lama knows that "one person can't do everything for everyone" (328). The Dalai Lama thinks that other people need to take responsibility for their actions, instead of relying on someone else to do it all for them. Where, then, is the line of demarcation between helping others and helping oneself?

That question is the centerpiece of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*.[7] Although Marina does not mention Brecht, López has engaged with similar texts in her novel *The Darling* (2015), which takes its name from a story by Anton Chekhov. Her Latina protagonist, Caridad, is obsessed with books written by "dead white males," including Chekhov, Flaubert, Nabokov, and Hardy. López, who states that she is very fond of these authors, says that it was an opportunity for her "to reread them and consider the ways in which novels about women by men inform and misinform readers, especially readers who are young women" (López, "An Interview"). The comparison between Brecht's play and López's novel serves a similar purpose, engaging with the same questions about gender, goodness, and helping others. Whether consciously written that way or not, there are simply too many overlaps between the stories to ignore. In fact, it is in comparison to a classic canonical text—written by a dead white male, albeit one highly sympathetic to women's rights—that Marina's progress against patriarchal culture becomes particularly clear. In the end, Marina finds a way to do everything that Brecht's protagonist fails to do.

Although Brecht, as a Marxist, offers a critique of capitalism in the play, he is equally focused on what makes a good person. The play was written from 1938 to 1940, as Brecht was on the run from the Nazis. Brecht wanted the USA to join the war against Hitler, and the play asks the big questions about how to make the world a better place. Clearly, a definition of goodness that did not involve taking action would be counterproductive to Brecht's goals; at the same time, the playwright refuses to take the easy road.

In Brecht's play, the definition of goodness is inexorably bound up with questions of gender. The protagonist is Shen Te, a former prostitute who helped three Chinese gods and is rewarded with enough money to buy a tobacco shop. Because the main character is a woman, many translations of the work are titled *The Good Woman of Szechwan* (or *Setzuan* in some cases), which completely misses the point. The German title, *Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Sezuan*), focuses on Shen Te as a human being, in part because the play highlights how differently men and women are treated by society.

Because Shen Te offers the three gods a place to stay for the night, they are convinced that they have found a good person. Shen Te states bluntly that she is not good, since she hesitated before offering them shelter. The gods dismiss her concern since she overcame it. Shen Te becomes even more insistent:

> Stop, Awakened Ones, I'm not at all sure that I'm good. I'd like to be, but then how would I pay my rent? [. . .] I'd really be happy keeping the commandments, showing a child's love for her parents, telling the truth. Not to covet my neighbor's house would be a joy to me, and to be true to one man would be very nice. [. . .] But how can I do all this? And if I break only a few commandments, I can't make ends meet. (21, 23)

Brecht uses the Chinese setting as the most transparent of covers for his actual discussion of Western values and institutions, including capitalism and religion. When the gods decide to give her money, as if they are paying a hotel bill, Shen Te immediately uses it to become a respectable businesswoman. Like Shen Te, Marina also has recently improved her situation. A year earlier, she had worked in insurance while getting her degree at night. The fact that she is now a teacher gives her a certain status; Nestor, a friend of her ex-boyfriend, thinks that her new position will make her a better person to testify on his behalf. Marina also realizes that she has succumbed to pressure from men to have sex in the past: a mistake she does not make with Carlos or Art. She is learning to set boundaries for her own sake; there is no name-calling of herself or others, no patriarchal definition of what she has done. Instead of a Chinese setting being used for a discussion of Western values, Marina's engagement with Buddhism allows for a version of that discussion that emphasizes her rejection of patriarchal values and systems.

Once Shen Te has money, the neighborhood descends on her quickly, and so many people take advantage of her help that she is in danger of losing her tobacco shop. To save herself, Shen Te dresses up as a man, pretending to be a cousin named Shui Ta. As a woman, Shen Te faces constant criticism if she says no to anyone. Her impulse to help others is similar to Marina's outlook on life. Just as Marina does, Shen Te takes in others, even if they do not deserve or appreciate it. The family Shen Te first lodged with when she arrived in Szechwan had kicked her out when she ran out of money, but Shen Te houses and feeds them now. In fact, Shen Te spends a large part of her earnings on food for the neighborhood. In return for this generosity, the neighborhood twists the definition of goodness to suit themselves. If she helps them, they

praise her; if she has to refuse, for whatever reason, she is suddenly no longer "good"—the classic strategy of abusers. "Good" to the neighbors means whatever is "good" (read: in their interests) for them, including stealing, with no concern for any higher definition of goodness. Shen Te feels helpless in the face of their abuse.

A clear problem in the play is that Shen Te wants to be seen as good (in part to make up for the life that she was forced to lead before), but she is caught in the virgin/whore dichotomy: either she is all good, or she is back to being perceived as bad, regardless of the circumstances. It makes sense in this setting for her to dress up as a man; although her alter-ego is treated as cruel for refusing to accommodate the bad behavior of the people in the neighborhood, "he" is also respected as a smart businessman. Of course, it is a woman in both roles, and she is increasingly ruthless when dressed as Shui Ta. Brecht suggests that gender is constructed: not only by society, but also by the individual. When dressed as a woman, Shen Te is unable to resist the attentions of her thoroughly-bad boyfriend; when dressed as a man, she can tell him off. In contrast, when Rudy assumes that sleeping with Marina will give him power over her, Marina kicks him out: something that Shen Te could never manage to do with Yang Sun. For Shen Te, her feminine instincts make her good in the conventional sense approved by the three Chinese gods, but also vulnerable. When dressed as a man, Shen Te's worst instincts begin to take over. She may be a "good" businessman (read: successful), but she is no longer a good person.

What makes Marina so notable in contrast is that she is a woman who both helps people and is capable of saying no when necessary. She does what she thinks is best, even though she faces constant abuse: from her ex-boyfriend Rudy, who calls her names when she refuses to do what he says; to Carlotta's sister Connie, who assumes that she must be a "dyke" (94) because she is not married and does not have a boyfriend.[8] Marina insists that Kiko and Reggie take responsibility for some parts of their lives (as the Dalai Lama would recommend), even when they grumble and make comments about PMS. Rudy even says flat-out that "the world is off-balance when women put themselves first" (114). As irritated as she is by the behavior of the people around her, Marina refuses to stop doing what she thinks is right, while remaining very much a woman. She does not allow the criticism to define her. She ignores, rejects, and/or reframes unfair arguments against her, and her (occasionally grim) sense of humor sustains her through some awful situations. Her definition of a good woman rises above the patriarchal system in a way that Shen Te would never imagine possible.

The Good Person of Szechwan is famous for refusing to provide easy answers, with an epilogue that insists that the audience grapple

with how to fix society, since society's problems are more than any one person trying to be good can handle. If the audience wants someone with Shen Te's goodness, but who does not allow others to bully her and rob her of the ability to do good deeds, they need to suggest how such a person can exist. Marina is one possible solution, succeeding in part because she is not trying to change all of society, but rather just her small corner of the world. She has not resolved all of her problems by the end of the novel, but her path is clearer than Shen Te's. Marina will continue to help people because she is good, while trying to avoid the manipulation of selfish individuals. As sympathetic as he is to the plight of women, Brecht presents characters who are unable to escape the gender dichotomy that ruins their lives. In López's novel, the only way forward for Marina is to act and speak as she thinks best, regardless of gender issues.

Motherhood and Nurturing

In an interview for *Book Page*, Cat Acree asks López about the roles of men and women in *The Realm of Hungry Spirits*: "Women in Latino literature so often seem separate from male characters, as if fighting their own battle. But Marina seems open to help the opposite gender, as though machismo is both unavoidable but also conquerable. How do you see the roles of males and females in your book?" In response, López notes that, despite the sexism that exists in the world,

> . . . to Marina, it seems wrong to hold this against men, especially young men who have had no hand in creating the imbalance of privilege and quite probably do not even understand how it works, much less how to take advantage of it. Discrimination and bias are two-edged swords—harmful on both sides. With privilege comes the expectation of competence, even skillfulness, some measure of achievement that evades characters like Kiko and Reggie. The pressures of the expectation of accomplishment that accompanies this privilege seems to paralyze many of the male characters in the novel, and Marina, in her nurturing role, seeks to support and comfort all of the people she cares about, regardless of their gender or the reason for their suffering. (López, "Lorraine López: Come Together")

In the novel, those expectations cause several characters to reject the idea of Marina as a mother figure, since she is not married and has no

biological children. In each case, Marina is a better parental figure than the actual parents involved.

Despite her break-up with Rudy, Marina continues to parent Letty, as she has since Letty was nine years old. One of the most poignant memories in the novel is how Marina patiently won her over (70-73), and it is Marina, not Rudy, who helps Letty and offers to take her in when Letty becomes suicidal after the loss of her baby. Marina has no illusions about parenthood, joking that Letty is more likely to call her "mamí" when she wants something (39), but her love for Letty is real. Marina loves her nephew, Kiko, as well, and her sister Della resents it, mostly out of guilt. When Kiko goes missing, and Marina, Xochi, and Della call hospitals to try to find him, Marina tells the woman at the admissions desk that she is Kiko's mother, so that the woman will release the information. Even though Marina points out that some hospitals do not consider aunts to be immediate family, Della throws a fit:

> "You could have said you were his sister," Della says, her face nearly purple now. "But *no*, you said you were his mother because that's what you've always wanted. Ever since he was born, you've been trying to take him away from me, reading to him, giving him toys, and taking him for ice cream." (269-270)

Since Della kicks Kiko out because her boyfriend wants her to do so, she hardly qualifies for mother of the year. When Kiko returns, Marina takes him back in; she is so relieved that he is all right that nothing else matters. She does not fit the traditional mold, but Marina chooses to be a nurturer. She refuses to limit herself to her sister's literalist definition of motherhood, just as she had rejected Carlos's implicit definition of finding yourself by rejecting others: a definition that would deny her the right to act as a maternal figure if she wants to do so.

Marina's choice to be a nurturer, however, does not mean that she accepts certain cultural stereotypes that are accepted by other people in the story. After Efrem beats his wife, another neighbor, Henry, calls the police. When her nephew Kiko and his friend Reggie call Henry a narc for calling the cops on Efrem, Marina flat out tells them to shut up, saying that Henry is "the only decent man around here for miles" (49). Marina's rejection of machismo, and its claim to so-called justified violence, is part of her reaction to the negative archetypes of women that go along with that type of violence: in particular, the oppressive Latina/Chicana archetypes that she sees around her.

The most pervasive archetypes are of what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the three mothers: "All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada (Malinche)*, the raped mother

whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the two" (qtd. in Madsen 8). Anzaldúa and other writers have as their agenda the mission to reclaim and/or rehabilitate these figures.[9] For Marina, these archetypes have quite different meanings. As mentioned earlier, the Virgin of Guadalupe is not an intercessor for Marina. When it is apparent that Marina's neighbor Carlotta actually personifies these archetypes, Marina rejects all of them. Carlotta stays with Marina for a while to escape her abusive husband, and Marina describes what she calls the

> three distinct manifestations of Carlotta: (1) La Sufrida, who laps up whatever brutality Efrem and those other devils [her sons] dish out and always, *always* returns for more; (2) La Llorona, who feels sorry for herself and spends so much time griping and complaining that even the most sincere potential Buddhist longs to smack her upside the head just to make her stop; and (3) La Chingada, the total bitch who hates everything and everyone, especially Efrem, with a thrilling vengeance. (68)

Clearly, passivity does not sit well with Marina, as her description of *la Sufrida* would indicate. If Anzaldúa sees *la Llorona* as someone who searches for her lost children, Marina sees her as a whiner. An attempt to see Marina as a *la Llorona* figure does not get far: her miscarriages two years earlier happen long after she started mothering both Letty and Kiko, among others. If anything, Marina is replacing her long-gone mother by becoming a mother figure to others. Marina's mother does not fit the categories either, since she is a mother who abandons her child. Marina becomes a different category: the no-longer-a-virgin woman who chooses to be a mother, will not abandon you, and will tell you to pick up your mess and take a shower, for crying out loud. In other words, she is human.

Despite her complaints, Carlotta returns to Efrem, who beats her so badly that she ends up in the hospital. Carlotta tells Marina that it is Carlotta's own fault, since she had spoken badly of her husband to Marina and ruined Efrem's reputation. Then, Carlotta implies that it is actually Marina's fault that the beating takes place; earlier in the story, Efrem had threatened Marina by drawing his index finger across his throat when he saw her returning home, and she had flipped him off. After a moment of feeling rotten, however, Marina rejects Carlotta's accusation, noting that it is actually "Efrem's spin on the story" (49). As it turns out, Carlotta was lying about why the fight had started anyway,

but she used the same abusive manipulation with Marina that Efrem had used with her.

Many times in the story, Marina correctly identifies that abusers not only try to blame their victims for the abuse, but also try to portray themselves as the real victims. As psychologist Michael Schreiner explains,

> This strategy comes into clear relief when victims don't just meekly accept abusive words and actions, but instead stand up and fight back. [. . .][Abusers] turn the tables by quickly moving the conversation away from what they've said or done to focus instead on the abusive, hurtful nature of their victim's complaint and the rotten nature of their victims in general! They'll make [. . .] a deceptive tale that supposedly proves the hostile, lazy, arrogant, cruel, abusive, etc., natures of their victims. (Schreiner)

Schreiner notes that the only way out of this situation is to recognize that these abusers are attempting to transfer responsibility for their actions to their victims.

Although she has moments of doubt, Marina clearly understands the process now and rejects it. She actually "sees" the damage it can cause after ex-boyfriend Rudy makes a particularly hurtful remark about Marina being unable to have children. She breathes deeply and says, out loud to herself, that he is wrong "about everything" (114), but then sees a face in her "darkened bedroom window—a blurry, tortured-looking mask of fury" (115). For one horrifying moment, she thinks it is Efrem outside of her window, but realizes that it is her own face staring back at her. López uses mirror imagery in several of her works: "Although this reflection is dark and often disturbing, López's stories imply that contemplating it is necessary for a fulfilling life" (Bennett). Marina's strength is that she recognizes the need to rid herself of her anger and move on.

In particular, Marina has learned to recognize and reject Rudy's behavior. Early in the novel, Marina describes the moment that Rudy broke up with her in the hospital, when he said

> That it just wasn't that much fun to be with me anymore. I don't know how he thought it would be *fun* to have his gravely ill, newborn grandson admitted to the hospital. How on earth did he expect me to make this more amusing—crack some jokes, make funny faces, tickle his feet? Back then, though, it

> stung me, like I was caught *not* doing something that I should be doing . . . (17)

When Rudy reappears in Marina's life, he insists that she allow his friend Nestor, a *babalawo* (a minor priest in the Santería religion), to hold a *limpieza*, or ritual cleansing, to rid her house of evil spirits. Rudy at first claims that the *limpieza* at Marina's house will help cure his grandson. Marina responds logically:

> I remember, again, why we broke up: Rudy is an idiot. "Are you out of your mind?" I ask rhetorically. "The baby has a congenital condition, meaning he was born with it. Will a limpieza in my house, of all places, reverse time, cram him back in the womb, so he can be reborn without this thing?" (15)

Rudy's response follows his pattern of abuse, saying, "'You're so cold, you won't do nothing to help no one. I should have known by now.' He pretends to shiver. 'Fría, fría, tan fría'" (16).

When Marina asks why Nestor doesn't want to hold the *limpieza* at the hospital, she discovers that she is supposed to testify against Nestor's wife in his divorce proceedings in return for the "free" ritual, so he can get custody of his daughters. Marina questions briefly if she should do it—not because of the abuse, but for the baby's sake—but common sense reasserts itself. Instead, Marina goes to the deposition and does the right thing by telling the truth. When Nestor tries to get even by posting Marina's name, photo, and email address on his website as an enemy of Santería, Rudy tells Marina that it is her problem, not Nestor's, and that she has better change her testimony before someone uses virtual voodoo to curse her. Since Santería and Voodoo are not the exact same thing, this creates some doubt about both Rudy and Nestor's understanding of that religion. Marina stands firm, rejecting their selfish definition of a good woman: namely, someone who does what her abuser wants her to do. She may not be a fourth-wave feminist, especially since she keeps losing her cell phone and has no social media presence, but she is also definitely not a so-called "slacktivist," who only posts about social issues or "likes" a cause, rather than taking action. Marina is fighting in the trenches.

Ironically, Nestor does end up helping Marina with her house, but not in the way that he had thought he would. Nestor's mentor, a higher-ranking priest, finds out what he has been doing, and Nestor is in big trouble. His *oluwo* tells him not to contest his wife's custody of their daughters, that he must pay child support, and that he must make some kind of restitution for the harm that he has caused Marina.

Instead of a *limpieza*, Marina makes both Nestor and Rudy clean up her backyard. Unlike Brecht's Shen Te, Marina does not allow others to pressure her into accepting a manipulative version of "goodness." The whole incident affirms Marina's belief in a higher morality—a higher definition of goodness than the one used by so many people around her. Moral relativism is exposed as selfish, destructive, and the tool of patriarchy. The argument that one group cannot judge another group's morality supports those in power, not those who are oppressed. Just because patriarchal culture has always abused women does not make it acceptable: especially not to the woman being abused, but also not to anyone with a conscience, as the *oluwo* demonstrates.

The decision that Marina reaches, therefore, is to find meaning in her own life by being herself. If feminism found one voice in a character whose solution to her situation is to walk into the sea, then it is high time to focus on a figure such as Marina, who would be the first to drag Edna out of the water.[10] The stories that people read and watch do influence reality, and too many stories end with women losing their agency either temporarily or permanently.[11] The answer is not to give up, and Marina does not. Instead of finding peace in solitude, Marina finds peace in action; instead of saying what others want her to say, she tells the truth. When she is even briefly inauthentic in the story, she regrets it and changes course. Her actions stem from her emotions, her maternal instincts, and her refusal to play by society's rules, which would deny her emotions as valuable and would not see a woman without children as an ideal mother figure. She does what she thinks is right, both from a higher moral standard and from compassion. She is also a complete mess at times: in other words, human. This definition, which benefits her, also ironically benefits the other people around her; in being herself, she is able to help others more. For Marina, a good woman defines herself.

Notes

1. The Bechdel test, or Bechdel-Wallace test, comes from a comic strip published by Alison Bechdel in 1985. The test was originally meant as a joke, but has been used widely, spawning multiple additional tests to apply to films. Some more recent additional tests include the Maki Mori Test (does a female lead get a character arc that does not revolve around male characters) and the Furiosa Test (do any misogynists attack or want to ban the film because it has a strong female lead character). Films that do not pass the Bechdel Test are not necessarily antifeminist (such as a film with only two characters, one male and one female), and passing the test does not guarantee a feminist perspective

(one famous example being the film *The Bikini Car Wash Company* [1992]). Nonetheless, many films still fail the test for all of the right/wrong reasons. "Useful Notes/The Bechdel Test" on Tvtropes.org has an excellent summary of the issue.

2. The existence of slang phrases such as "man-whore" only emphasizes how fundamentally sexist the English language is. The lack of male-specific insults for sexually active behavior comes from a cultural assumption that men can transgress both societal and religious moral standards without judgment—at least, from their fellow men. It is difficult to alter perceptions in society if there are literally no words for the new perspectives.

3. The Virgin/Whore Dichotomy has been studied extensively, of course. Contemporary blogs and articles recognize how difficult it is to escape this dichotomy, since it would mean a change in attitude in society in general. The #MeToo movement has not so much brought about change in society as it has exposed how unequal the treatment of women has been and remains. For some pertinent modern discussions, see "Raunch Culture and the Virgin-Whore Dichotomy," by Ruby Hamad, and "The Madonna-Whore Complex," by Jessy Forsmo-Shadid. A good summary of one aspect of this issue can be found in "Mary Versus Eve: Paternal Uncertainty and the Christian View of Women," by Vladimir Tumanov. Tumanov traces this dichotomy from Biblical texts to twentieth-century Hollywood films.

4. López and Blas Falconer co-edited a volume of scholarly essays dealing with various aspects of that issue: *The Other Latin@: Writing Against a Singular Identity*. The essays disprove the unfortunate mainstream stereotype that all Latino/a, Chicano/a, and Hispanic identities are the same, celebrating instead the plurality of voices writing in the general field.

5. From a personal interview with Lorraine M. López.

6. See, for example, "Why Dictators Don't Like Jokes," by Srdja Popovic and Mladen Joksic. The political aspect of humor is particularly relevant to the fight against intransigent social structures.

7. All Brecht quotations are taken from the translation by Tony Kushner (2010), a parallel text edition.

8. And here we have the problem with reclaiming vocabulary: some people in society do not get the memo. Alison Bechdel's comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008), is an example of linguistic re-appropriation of a pejorative term; when Connie uses the same term, however, she does so in its original pejorative sense. "Dyke" remains a term that can be empowering when used within the lesbian community—a defiant rejection of patriarchy—but is rarely so when used by someone outside of that community.

9. For a further discussion of these archetypes, see *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*, edited by Beth Miller. While many of the essays discuss these archetypes, see the following essays in particular: "Marina/Malinche: Masks and Shadows," by Rachel Phillips; "Female Archetypes

in Mexican Literature," by Luis Leal; and "Sexual Politics and the Theme of Sexuality in Chicana Poetry," by Elizabeth Ordóñez.

10. I refer, of course, to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).

11. Tropes about disposable women are alive and well, even if many of the women are not. Some of the tropes about disposable women include, but are not limited to, the following examples: Fridging, Bury Your Gays, Cartwright Curse, and Disposable Love Interest. See Tvtropes.org for complete explanations.

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The [Latinx] *Darling*: Lorraine López Reads the Canon

Donna A. Gessell

During the 2017 SAMLA conference in Atlanta, at one of the sessions dedicated to the memory of Judith Ortiz Cofer, her mentor and friend, Lorraine M. López made a comment that speaks not only to Ortiz Cofer's legacy, but also to her own: in the "transaction of meaning," the act of "language transference becomes a way to find freedom." She described "a migrating consciousness" that is explored in a "liminal space" that involves "linguistic decoding" of experience to find that freedom. These concepts can be employed to explain how López's *The Darling*—a novel that she dedicates to Ortiz Cofer—works to demonstrate how its heroine, Caridad, attains the freedom of selfhood, through both literary and real-life experiences, by exploring, challenging, and then ultimately transcending the oppression faced by females living in male-dominated cultures.

Even though López's mentor Ortiz Cofer was among the first to popularize female Latinx literature, she did so while insisting that her identity as stereotypically Latinx be negotiated. Instead, Ortiz Cofer placed importance on her inner self, commenting, "As I look deeper into myself, I discover that I left the place where my family's well is located. As a writer I am always in the new territory of Myself Alone. I am looking for new lands to discover every time I begin a sentence. I carry nothing but a dowser's wand and my need to make order, to find a few answers" ("A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook" 34). Likewise, through Caridad, López explores leaving family to attain selfhood, negotiating the Latinx borderlands of cultural identity, spaces first identified by Gloria Anzaldúa in her memoir, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published in 1987. Although López's *The Darling* was published in 2015, its setting spans the period from the mid 70s to the mid 80s and details Caridad's journey from oppression to freedom, similar to the journey Anzaldúa describes for herself. By the end of the novel, Caridad transcends the dominant male culture to establish selfhood in her own liminal space. She first has to recognize the power that culture has occupied in creating her beliefs, the process which Anzaldúa describes in the section "Cultural Tyranny":

> Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. [. . .]
>
> The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. (38-9)

Anzaldúa traces the route of her own "rebellion" against cultural tyranny to attain "self-faith," relating that "I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic natured buried under the personality that had been imposed on me" (37, 38). She makes it clear that even though she left her family and home "I didn't leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being." She recognizes her "strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair"; likewise, she admits that it was her "stubborn will" that "tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms" (38). As a part of the struggle for a woman to define self, she recognizes how cultural tyranny constructed by males and the Church allows "only three directions" for a woman: "to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother." She does concede an alternative: "Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us" (39).

In her own life, López is well acquainted with the limited choices women face as she herself chose education and career, which allowed her to become Anzaldúa's "self-autonomous person." In an interview with David Wiseman, "Latino Literature's Past and Future: A Conversation with Lorraine López," she lists the service roles available to her as a child: "As a woman, you could become a nurse, a teacher, or you could be a mother." Instead, she found the path to becoming a writer at the suggestion of her third-grade teacher, advice that she describes as "a flash of light, illuminating [her] world" (141).

Likewise, through *The Darling*, López traces the path of Caridad, who creates her own liberated space as a woman and as a professional writer in the literary world. López explores that world, where males have traditionally defined the culture as belonging to men, even when women are the focal characters. She does so by depicting Caridad's evolution not only through a number of romantic relationships with men, but also through her reading of canonical texts, almost all written by

men and all of which present negative images of women characters who are strong, but who are inevitably dominated and ultimately destroyed by their male lovers. In the interview with Teresa Dovalpage, López at first jokes about using these books, but then seriously identifies the problems that her novel addresses: she explains that *The Darling* "was basically an excuse to return to the books I love, to reread them and consider the ways in which novels about women by men inform and misinform readers, especially readers who are young women" ("An Interview with Lorraine López"). Her claim—how these literary classics ultimately misinform young women readers while purporting to inform them—reinforces Anzaldúa's contention that "Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (39).

Given López's knowledge of how the male-dominated canon works to undermine women's search for self-faith, it may at first seem ironic that she positions her novel so closely with Anton Chekhov's short story, "The Darling." Sharing its title, plot, and theme, her novel reinforces the connection immediately with its epigraph, a quotation from the short story: "She was always fond of someone, and could not exist without loving." That López chooses to retell such a disturbing story—even with a heroine who will ultimately realize her own identity—reveals the depths of "cultural tyranny" that rages in the male-dominated literary canon.

Chekhov's story explores the life of Olga Smyonovna, nicknamed Olenka, who serially adopts the personas suggested by a string of male relationships. Olenka adopts the interests, vocabulary, and lifestyle, "in imitation of [the man]" so that she "was of the same opinion as he about everything" for each of the men in her life (171, 172). The story reinforces Anzaldúa's contention that "[t]he individual exists first as kin . . . and last as self" (40). Olenka progresses from the role of daughter of a well-established father, to that of a wife of a theatrical entrepreneur, then wife of a lumberyard magnate, and then mistress of a veterinary surgeon. During a period with no male relationships, she is described to almost disappear, eventually revived only when attempting to befriend her former lover's son. As she predictably repeats the son's words, the narrator announces "this was the first opinion to which she gave utterance with positive conviction after so many years of silence and dearth of ideas" (174).

Even if Chekhov was trying to disturb his audience with the enormity of Olenka's loss of self, the short story and its implications were unfathomable to audiences of its time. The incomprehensibility is evident in Leo Tolstoy's comments, which at first seem to appreciate Chekhov's sense of a "new woman" but then subvert it:

> I believe that while he was writing 'The Darling,' the author had in his mind, though not in his heart, a vague image of a new woman; of her equality with man; of a woman mentally developed, learned, working independently for the good of society as well, if not better than a man; of the woman who has raised and upholds the woman question; and in writing 'The Darling' he wanted to show what woman ought not to be. (960)

Tolstoy continues to argue against the possibility of a "new woman": "But a woman's work is from her very vocation different from a man's, and so the ideal of feminine perfection cannot be the same as the ideal of masculine perfection." He sums up, asserting that "[Olenka] will always remain a type of what a woman can be in order to be happy herself, and to make the happiness of those with whom destiny throws her" (961). He denies the possibility of a woman's agency outside of relationships with males who would dominate her.

In the hands of López, "the darling," Caridad, is naively dumbfounded at her possession by the male author whose influence so controls her: "Now, there was no way for Caridad to explain how a piece of fiction had hammered her so. How Olga Semyonovna—Olenka—had leapt from the page to superimpose her image on to nearly every reflective surface, hijacking Caridad's thoughts, even disrupting her sleep until she longed to cry out, like the young boy at the end of the story: *Get away! Leave me alone!*" (5, italics in the original). As the reviewer at *FantasticFiction* reminds the reader, Caridad believes that she has chosen to learn about love and being a woman independently:

> Raised in a household of women, she rejects examples of womanhood offered by her long-suffering mother, her caustic eldest sister Felicia, and her pliant and sentimental middle sister Esperanza. Instead Caridad, a compulsive reader, educates herself about love and what it means to be a sentient and intelligent woman by reading classic literature written by men, and supplements this with life lessons gleaned from her relationships.

The novel delineates these relationships by presenting a string of men, all self-absorbed, whom she allows to shape her actions, despite her knowledge that they each misrepresent reality to privilege their male privilege. The reviewer at *FantasticFiction* identifies the problem: "Rather than absorbing beliefs held by the men in her life, as does Chekhov's heroine, Caridad instead draws on her lovers' resources

in attempting to improve and educate herself." She believes she can use the men to support her needs; however, their presence and that of the authors she reads continuously thwart Caridad's decade-long struggle to find her identity within a culture that largely still expects women to sacrifice for their men. In the process of her struggles, the reader almost becomes overwhelmed by what she terms her "bad decisions," a refrain she often repeats (256). Even as she uses the resources she gleans from each man, she realizes his selfishness; however, she is already involved with the next man, whose psychological problems become her own until she can negotiate his hold and free herself. The men satisfy her only partially and only temporarily. She realizes that, like the heroine of *Sister Carrie*, she "strategically mov[es] from man to man to improve her circumstances," and that she is "like a trapeze artist near the top of a striped tent, expecting to be caught and held until she was ready to leap again" (51, 54).

The string of relationships includes a variety of men: her teenaged husband Jorge, whose immaturity keeps him more absorbed with another couple than with Caridad, so much so that he destroys her idealistic notions of love by proposing an open marriage; Seth, whom she lives with to be able to afford food, and who despite his affluence and Buddhist trappings becomes so self-involved with finding his vocation in life that "he'd never bothered to know her at all" and doesn't understand how his actions can be construed as racist (64); Gray, who understands her the best, but is consumed with his own sexual identity and expresses it through cross-dressing and eventually undergoes gender reassignment surgery; Nash, who relies on Monarch notes for his studies to become a high school English teacher, a profession compromised by his romance with a fourteen-year-old girl; Daniel, whose physical abusiveness drives away his girlfriend but whose strength entices Caridad into pregnancy; and Harrison—whom she marries only to protect her son—who calls her "darling" as a pet name, and who is perhaps the most abusive: his graduate studies depend on Caridad to read his assigned texts and write his research papers, while he stays at home supposedly convalescing.

Without her realizing it, these relationships threaten to extinguish her very identity, which she believes she is building. Caridad begins to realize how these relationships challenge her notions of selfhood only when she fails to recognize her own image reflected in a darkened window, as López comments:

> That moment when she misidentifies her own reflected image—takes it to be a timid customer approaching—is a physical embodiment of this idea, just the way Gray's lit-

> eral crossdressing represents the way in which male authors assume female identities in their novels. Not only does Caridad fail to recognize herself in the darkened glass, she resents the hesitancy and fearfulness that she perceives in this approaching "customer." I return to that moment later in the chapter, when Caridad is falling for a man who is hazardous. The second time she sees her reflection, she recognizes it at once, and she's proud of the energy in her step and admires the way her face glows like a flame. This is her second mistake — failure to recognize the self in jeopardy. (Dovalpage)

Far from finding her identity from her relationships, Caridad has instead learned to distrust her own judgment.

As dangerous as Caridad's relationships prove in and of themselves, however, López further complicates her protagonist's self-perception through her constant reading of canonical works. All but one are written by male authors, and all present strong female characters who ultimately lose control over their lives because of their relationships with the men who dominate them. Because she has already been so steeped in the values of her patriarchal culture, Caridad's reading of the novels conflates her perceptions of her self-identity in the real world dominated by male values with those of the fictional heroines in the fictional worlds invested with the values of their male authors. The conflation is further complicated because Caridad is intellectually aware, even when her emotional intelligence fails to support a positive self-image.

That Caridad has so thoroughly conflated reality and fiction becomes obvious even in the novel's opening paragraph, when López introduces Caridad by noting her love for Chekhov rather than for the man she is about to marry:

> On her wedding day, Caridad Delgado pined for a dead man. He was a doctor and a playwright, a charismatic raconteur sought after for parties and weekends in the country. [. . .] His image flashed in her mind's eye as Caridad now hurried through the cobblestone vestibule to find a restroom. In the picture, Anton's eyes glimmered with attentiveness and wit behind round wire-rimmed lenses. [. . .] Over seventy years later, she longed for the man who promised "you *are* what you believe in." (1, italics in the original)

Caridad naively "recognized the sweet emptiness described in Chekhov's story about a good-natured woman ever-searching for love" and even questions her ideas about love, asking, "'What if this isn't

love? I mean, maybe I don't really know what love is, and now I'll never find out.'" She understands that the woman is a "tender cipher" yet fails to recognize the power of the patriarchal culture over the character (4). And that is the central problem of the novel: having internalized the values of her own patriarchal culture, Caridad accepts the fiction as fact because she has not yet learned to believe in herself, instead leaving her identity open to advice both from the men she pursues romantically, and also the men she reads about with such passion. As Dovalpage adeptly comments, "Caridad breathes through the novels that she devours." In addition to Chekhov's "The Darling," she reads and obsesses over Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Lawrence's *Women in Love*, Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Durrell's *Justine*, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and Richardson's *Pamela*. Even though they all present strong women, these women are incapable of defining themselves other than through the men they love, men who selfishly, with the blessings of their culture, have their own interests in mind. Inevitably, the women are disappointed in life and love, and many either kill themselves physically or resign themselves to lives of self-imposed exile, killing themselves psychologically.

The consequences are disastrous for Caridad's "journey of self discovery" as López terms it in her interview with Dovalpage: "The guides she has chosen are dead white men, and the help they give her is mixed at best. Though she questions them from time to time, she trusts their male authority, as if they know more about becoming a woman than she does. For most of the novel, she does not perceive her own authority, and as a consequence, she fails to recognize herself." She also fails to identify how her misperceptions affect her relationships. For instance, reading Chekhov, "Caridad pictured the mild Russian wife, her simple heart an empty vessel waiting to be filled with a husband's passions, and Caridad remembered arguing with Jorge's father in support of his art when the old man suggested Jorge set it aside to teach" (17). Her romanticized notions of the patriarchal ideal wife cloud her judgment about the need to be economically practical. Reading Chekhov even affects Caridad's attempts at writing, encouraging her to write what her husband suggests, and to be reluctant to be her own self: "How much easier it was to champion his desire than to dare to speak her own: to be a writer herself like Anton, to compose the kind of stories that she loved to read, to remind the world that it was bad and dreary, but that stories—when told well—could be sublime" (17). In fact, her obsession with Chekhov diminishes her own voice, as she notices that "She used to have his words at the tip of her thoughts, and now only one

phrase, the ending of 'The Lady with the Dog,' bobbed to the surface of memory: 'the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning'" (18). She loses all desire to pursue her own writing, as Jorge's idea of helping her find her passions is to urge her to accept his love of art, "Once in the workshop, Caridad enjoyed it" (22).

Her stasis is reminiscent of that described by Anzaldúa:

> the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.
>
> The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can't more forward, can't move backwards. [. . .]
>
> We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. (42-3, italics in the original)

The words of the authors that Caridad reads usurp her ways of processing her emotions, even as her first marriage falls apart. Reading Shakespeare's sonnets, "She imagined herself regretting lost love, though she couldn't think who she might miss in this way. Probably not Jorge, who, after only a few months of marriage, had just proposed sharing her with his friends" (24). Instead of creating her own words to negotiate her emotions, she simply appropriates those of male authors, even when they are inappropriate. Rather than questioning the process, Caridad adapts her thinking to accept what the male authors present. For instance, she "considered different ways of loving [that] Shakespeare's sonnets covered" and accepts "the commonplace closeness that Shakespeare now and again described" (24).

As she reads through the canon, Caridad's conflation of the fictional worlds with her own continues. Even though she sometimes intellectually comments on the incongruities, she is unable to see accurately how the literary models offer problematic guidance. For instance, reading *Anna Karenina* after reading *Madame Bovary*, she is

> thinking Jorge should read the novel. Then maybe he would see it was not enough that Emma's husband, like Anna Karenina's, was not *that* bad—*what a standard!*—and hadn't Charles Bovary himself sought an ideal in Emma after his plain and shrewish first wife? But an unsophisticated reader like

> Jorge would surely find Emma Bovary as selfish and unlikable as Anna Karenina. (36, italics in the original)

Even though she understands how the novels are constructed, her emotions are so out of synch with her intellect that she refuses to identify what's at stake for herself.

For instance, she explains how Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* speaks to her because "[t]he title, it has my name in it," and eager for its advice "she read the novel nightly as if it were medicine prescribed for a specific ailment" (48, 52). The advice is that "'When a girl leaves home at eighteen, she does one of two things, [. . . e]ither she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse'" (52). In her case, the "ailment" is the mismanagement of her string of lovers. True, she sees Carrie "as a loose woman, a prostitute of sorts, strategically moving from man to man to improve her circumstances," but recognizes that "Carrie's situation—like Caridad's—was too complicated to sum up this way" (51). Instead, "[s]he considered the books she loved most and how heroines in these were labeled one thing or another only by the shallowest of readers" (51). She has yet to realize the real problem: negotiating patriarchal culture, one that denies women their own identities and voice. Instead, she believes that she has bested it and is using the men in her life to obtain her needs, first money and then later self-fulfillment.

However, in real life her voice is muted: "Discussing money matters flustered Caridad, though, and since Seth's voice was louder and more insistent than hers, there was little chance of her achieving more than a quarrel if she mentioned any of this to him" (50). His response to her is to belittle her for trying to understand the world by reading: "'Who do you think you are anyway? My mother's right—you have *no idea* who you are. You read all these books like they're written for you, like those authors are sending special messages to you. The books you love—they're not for you.' He released a snort of laughter. 'They never were for anyone like you'" (61, italics in the original).

Ignoring him, Caridad goes from book to book, trying to capture the kind of love promised by popular culture, "that once-in-a-lifetime lightning flash of attraction described in the song on the radio" (24). She reads and rereads Nabokov's *Lolita*, her first reading "devoured . . . in great greedy gulps, and at the last page, she regretted not lingering over the dazzling prose. 'Love at first sight,' she murmured to herself, quoting Nabokov, 'at last sight, at ever and ever sight'" (123). During the re-reading, she does realize that the reality of the situation depicted in the novel is not one of romance, and yet the fictional world weirdly coincides with her reality when she finds a photograph hidden by her cur-

rent lover, Nash, in which "The girl's breasts were pink-tipped buds like those of the pubescent nymphets, the girleens that Humbert Humbert lusted after in *Lolita*" (129). When she confronts Nash, he admits the girl was fourteen and Caridad remembers that he was the one who had "lent her Nabokov's book, said it was his favorite" (129). He also relies on Monarch Notes instead of reading books, which she reminds herself "should have explained the novel for him, telling how it implicates instead of rationalizing the narrator's obsession" (130). The realization that he is unwilling to read at a more complex level allows her to escape the relationship, but she remains enthralled with male canonical fiction fixated on heroines who self-destruct in patriarchal societies.

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* uses "the sin of self-esteem" to condemn women (qtd in *The Darling* 139). As Anuzaldúa has pointed out, in the cultural tyranny "selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue" (40). Even as Caridad questions whether or not self-esteem is a sin, she understands its function as "hubris, the false pride that encouraged a woman of her milieu to imagine an unfettered life of travel and discovery." She even goes so far as to make a marginal note that "Pride was the flaw that marred the portrait of a lady" and realizes that the real issue of living in a culture constructed by men is that "the novel argued against providing bold and bright women the resources to live life on their own terms, suggesting they would, like Isabel, squander these on ruthless and controlling men" (139). Her words echo those of Anzaldúa's, which describe how her will urged her "to live life on my own terms" (38).

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Ubervilles* imposes upon her how the patriarchy would categorize her own life with the novel's first five subheadings, which she claims "could be the story of her life": "'The Maiden,' 'Maiden No More,' 'The Rally,' 'The Consequence,' 'The Woman Pays'" (163). Although she recognizes the pattern and realizes that it is not one of her own making, Caridad is not prepared to realize that it is one of a patriarchal culture's making, one which Anzaldúa describes: "If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman" (39, italics in the original). Caridad is frustrated by "these great authors [who] were intent on denying Isabel and Tess even a sliver of satisfaction: no pleasure in sex and no joy in motherhood. What punishers they were. Caridad couldn't bear to imagine losing her child" (163). Unfortunately, her life mirrors fiction, as her relationship with her current lover Daniel slides into one of abuse, followed by rape and impregnation. Hardy's novel has conditioned her to accept the treatment by Daniel as fated, much

as Tess accepts that of Alec. Daniel, recognizing the power of the novels over Caridad, uses them against her, ironically never understanding how applicable the appraisal of Alec is to his own behavior.

Caridad's one healthy relationship is with cross-dressing Gray. It most answers her physical and psychological needs; however, his female identification ultimately transforms him from boyfriend and husband to best friend, the latter a perspective not addressed in any of the novels that she reads. He tries to share his view of a self that combines the masculine and feminine in his treatment of her as he recognizes "that balanced people had both masculine and feminine energy, and he said she had good masculine energy" (68). This recognition of duality within humans is one that Anzaldúa discusses. After she recognizes its negative power to create a class lower than women—"[t]he queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human"—she affirms its power:

> There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halfs are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. (40)

Through her acceptance of Gray's gender reassignment surgery to become Leslie, Caridad learns the importance of self-fulfillment, while appreciating Henry James's observation: "Three things in human life are important—the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind" (154).

Although Caridad eventually comes to appreciate Gray's embodiment of both the male and female, she is unable to recognize how Gray's cross-dressing is metaphorically practiced by her male authors who cross-dress to write in the voices of female protagonists. This literary deviance is accepted—even lauded—for its usefulness in advising young women. López, however, exposes the phenomenon for what it is:

> *The Darling* is also a contemplation of cross-dressing. The dead white men, the authors that Caridad idolizes, assume female identities through writing the perspectives of women in their novels. Apart from Nabokov, these authors are

> "dressing up" as women, much the way that Gray costumes himself in a wig, skirt, blouse and pantyhose, and freeing themselves from maleness to inhabit the female psyche, imaginatively. (Dovalpage*)*

Caridad begins to pull away from emotionally identifying with how the cross-dressing male authors treat women with James, but especially with Hardy. Nevertheless, even though "she'd been bitter with disappointment at how Tess was punished," she remains so possessed by the male-drawn heroines that these portraits present a convenient way to evaluate her own self-worth (176). As she realizes the impracticality of her dependence on men, she thoroughly appraises herself:

> *What kind of woman am I?* Caridad wondered. Nothing like Isabel Archer, resigned to a loveless marriage out of stubborn virtue, and not at all like Hardy's Tess, who'd unsuccessfully spurned Alec d'Urberville. Perhaps she was more like Carrie Meeber, bedding men to make her way in the world, though Dreiser neglected to mention her physical desires. [. . .]
>
> Maybe she was like Madame Bovary, though Caridad cared little for the fineries that proved nearly as irresistible to Emma as her lovers, and she couldn't imagine ever swallowing arsenic. Caridad also lacked the melancholic determination to throw herself under a train like Anna Karenina. Why did passionate women so often take their lives to relieve their suffering? Why so much suffering? Even Lady Chatterley put up with way too much before leaving her impotent, narcissistic, and controlling husband to wait for the groundskeeper, who, though sexy, was likewise bossy. Could Caridad be a superannuated Lolita? (183-84, italics in the original)

The self-examination, even though it is in terms of male-drawn women, becomes even more poignant because it occurs moments before Caridad nearly dies when a tour bus crashes into her car.

After Caridad has a long recovery, the insurance claim from the accident allows her to pursue what Anzaldúa terms the fourth choice of education and career. She completes undergraduate and master's degrees in English literature. However, in a graduate class Caridad reads the one novel that López features not written by a male, Chopin's *The Awakening*, although it too ends in a strong female's self-sacrifice. Also, because male critics dominated literary criticism when the book was written, the identity of Edna Pontellier has also been appropriated

by males, a traditional perspective brought forward by Lance, one of Caridad's classmates: "'So it's no wonder the book was critically condemned and banned.' [. . .] 'What the character does to resolve her conflict is unconscionable, even immoral. Never mind her infidelity—as a mother of young children, she has *no right* to take her life'" (192, italics in the original). When Caridad challenges him, the exchange reveals as much about López's novel as it does about Chopin's:

> "Especially back then," he said, "in Chopin's time—she should have known better than to write such a book, as if it's okay for a mother of two little kids to up and drown herself, just because she can't do whatever she feels like doing, just because society's a little strict. Again and again in the novel, she makes bad decisions."
>
> Caridad was tired of this complaint about fictional characters. It often issued from the most unsophisticated readers. "Would we have this novel," she said, "would we have any novels if characters always made good choices?" (193)

Her question reaffirms her own problem. Here, however, providing insights into Caridad's slow evolution, López inserts a Buddhist perspective, rendered by a female classmate:

> "On a metaphysical level," she said in her high, fluty voice, "especially from a Buddhist point of view, Edna's suicide can be seen as an attempt to grasp the essence of her being—an act of heroism. [. . .] In fact, Edna Pontellier says this outright: 'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself.'" (194)

However, even this explanation is mansplained away by another student, who again argues the received male perspective.

Despite how obviously skewed the males' opinions are, they are made even more egregious by the male students' inability to write convincingly. Caridad not only allows the positions to stand; she does so by rewriting their research papers to strengthen their positions, avoiding arguments over substance. Her ability to cross-dress while writing for her male classmates furthers her problems, as one of these classmates, Harrison, eventually marries her.

Perhaps the most psychologically punishing of her lovers, Harrison only appears to offer the stability she needs for herself and her child; it is his neediness that controls the relationship, as it manifests itself

with his insistence that others take care of him, including Caridad and his parents, despite his good health. Harrison is the one who insists on calling her "darling," even though it makes her wince. He even uses the endearment in his marriage proposal to her as well as later on when he suggests that she get pregnant in hopes of greater financial support from his parents. Even though she dislikes him, she agrees to marry him, worried that her son's father, Daniel, will take him away from her. She recalls Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders's observation that "*I found the Women had lost the Privilege of saying No* . . ." (215, italics in the original). Even while accepting Harrison's proposal, "purring in her ear" are Moll's words reinforcing male culture's insistence on kinship above self: "*It lay very heavy upon my Mind too, that I had a Son, a fine lovely Boy, above five Years old, and no Provision made for it, at least that I knew of; with these Considerations, and a sad Heart, I went home that Evening, and began to cast with my self how I should live, and in what manner to bestow my self, for the residue of my Life*" (222, italics in the original). Even though her culture is two hundred years subsequent, it has not become less male-centric, and she marries as Moll would.

Fully aware that they are male constructs, Caridad continues to read about male-created heroines. When Harrison enlists her to read Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* for his English graduate comprehensive exams, she explains it in ways suggesting her own subservient position, describing the book as "*about a servant girl who's trying to preserve her sense of self and dignity despite her master's advances*" (228, italics in the original). Once again, a male author describes patriarchal privilege as love, or in Pamela's words: "'I know not how it came, nor when it begun; but creep, creep it has, like a Thief upon me; and before I knew what was the Matter, it look'd like Love'" (236). When Caridad discusses the novel with Harrison, his comment, "She sounds like a proper temptress, a scheming wench," indicates his belief that women are at fault for their fates in a patriarchal-constructed world. Caridad protests that Pamela is only fifteen and innocent, but he counters that Caridad is "the innocent, darling" (236). She understands that the lie of innocence is a patriarchal form of protection that ensures rigidly defined roles, and argues that "It's about skewed power dynamics between master and servant, one a poor girl and the other a privileged man who isolates her from her family, who doesn't care that she's lonely" (237). That Harrison stops her argument with a kiss as well as another address of "darling" belies her own situation as similar to Pamela's: a power dynamic with a husband who exercises his privilege.

Furthermore, typical to abuse, Harrison has isolated her; however, that isolation from her family, including her son, further advances her understanding of the power imbalance. Caridad realizes that she is

now nearing thirty and has "a husband who was ill, a son who needed stability, and a job she intended to keep" (243).

Given the power inherent in systems of masculine traditional identity, how does Caridad claim her identity? How does she escape these cycles of so-called favorably intentioned would-be lovers and metaphorically "cross-dressing" authors whose portrayals of women present such negative role models? López does not pretend that the process of becoming self-aware is easily obtained by obvious means. In fact, readers must fight the impulse to credit Caridad's resilience to her Latinx heritage and a strong religious base. After all, Caridad's name in Spanish means "charity," completing the meaning of her sisters' names, Felicia—which means "happiness," but also starts with Fe, Spanish for "faith"—and Esperanza, Spanish for "hope." However, this interpretation of Christian virtues, which insist on humility, is weakened by Caridad's disregard for religion. The reader also might credit her strength to her family as a supportive unit. True, throughout the novel she depends on her female-centric family for shelter, childcare, and emotional support. She comes to realize that she loves her family even with its imperfections: her absent father, who abandoned the family in her childhood; her mother who has health issues but gives herself constantly to her family and to others; her eldest sister, who is in a dysfunctional marriage with an alcoholic husband yet is supportive, and the middle sister, whose criticism of Caridad is due to her self-deprecatory yet sincere desire to help. Despite their dysfunction and her own, Caridad learns to understand who they are and to recognize the kinds of love that they each exhibit consistently and constantly throughout the novel; however, she learns how to define who she is on her own.

She does so as a result of learning from herself, and reinterpreting the authors she has read as well as her love relationships. Her independence excludes even those whom she has married, a relationship that many—both in mainstream U.S. and Latinx cultures—place heavy psychological significance upon because of its tendency to define a woman and her choices in life. In fact, López has commented on marriage as being the "spark for this book," which began after she read a non-fiction book on marriage: "I read about marriage, about how unnatural a state it is for humans and what a struggle it is to sustain. The book deconstructed the idea of marriage as 'work'" (Dovalpage). López comments further on the centrality of the theme of marriage to the novel, as well as its shortcomings for defining women:

> I noticed how many novels about women are written by men and the shortcomings in these, such as the way in which male authors shy away from female sexuality and motherhood. I

> determined, then, to write a book about a woman who seeks to find herself through such literature and through serial relationships, including a few marriages. Also, I wanted to begin with a wedding because marriage is where many stories end, as you've noticed, and readers are left to assume that happily ever after ensues. I hoped to complicate that notion some.

Complicate it she does. Repeatedly she presents relationships and literary plots that in a variety of ways promise happiness, only to make them ultimately fail because they are based on the happiness of the male in the relationship and not the female. In the place of a temporary, socially constructed ideal of happiness that privileges a male's view of happiness, López, through Caridad, invents a new kind of "happily ever after" ending for the novel, one that is more universal in its significance because it rejects male-dominated constructions of happiness and instead posits the infrastructure for an individual to determine self-awareness.

The cycles of Caridad's losing her identity to would-be lovers and to male canonical authors reinforce the difficulties of claiming her identity in a patriarchal culture. López describes these systems of masculine traditions that work to restrict female identity:

> Once there is a certain prescribed cultural identity created in order to attain solidarity, individuality and diversity begin to suffer. This singular identity delimits and controls behavior within the group, and that is not very interesting to me. I see this in many nascent movements, where the male leadership negates or subsumes the female presence. And it's almost an imitation, a mimesis, of what happened to the marginalized group in the mainstream culture, wherein Latinos have experienced exclusion and negation for linguistic, cultural, and racial difference. I just am not intrigued by that pattern. It negates me as a woman writer; it subsumes my individual identity and diminishes my authority as an author. I am not at all interested in that. (Wiseman 144)

In the final pages of the novel, Caridad transforms her previous constructions of identity—both those literary and real-life. She has reached the "crossroads and choice" described by Anzaldúa: "to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame [. . .] or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control" (43). Caridad leaves her third husband and accepts her own agency, causing her to examine whether her choices have harmed others, and

most importantly, to understand that her son is the person who is most vulnerable: "Who had her choices endangered? Miles, of course—her own son. The risk was greatest for him, but would her choices harm him? He was happy and bright, and she had woven for him a sturdy network of family and friends" (257). Even though she turns to her son, similar to how Olenka in Chekhov's "The Darling" turns to her former lover's son, it is with a difference. She does so with the realization that "There were more choices" in her own situation than for the canonical male-created heroines (258). Her recovery of her selfhood solidifies as she exercises her self-determination.

However, she still must face a larger test resulting from yet another action of abuse by Harrison: he has taken all of her books, causing Caridad to realize the depth of her connection to them: "A feeling rose in Caridad like a bubble that she expected to pop. She waited for anger or grief, but all she had experienced was the bubble expanding, the hollowness of it empty as any sorrow she had known" (259). Not only is her personal space violated but also her identity, as she realizes how her selfhood has been forged in the liminal spaces of the texts: "But he had no right to take her books, [. . .] but her own words, too, written in the margins of their pages. For Caridad, who had never kept a journal, the books held the record of her thoughts and ideas" (259). The realization is enlarged when his mother sends her books back, and they suffer water damage, destroying her meticulous annotations: "In the margins, her pencil marks had faded and the notes she'd penned in ink had bled—most of them unreadable now" (261). Nevertheless, her loss transforms into a realization of freedom, and she chooses the responsibility of selfhood. Her marginal notes stripped away, she realizes that she is ready to create her own narratives, not only in her life actions but also in her writing. She is at last free of any binding male relationships—both literary and real world—which have previously so defined her thinking, actions, and identity. She is now, to use Ortiz Cofer's self-description, "always in the territory of Myself Alone" ("A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook" 34).

Her self-reclamation is complete when she examines her copy of *Moll Flanders* and finds the note that she made in response to its "final lines that read ' . . . we resolve to spend the Remainder of our Years in sincere Penitence, for the wicked Lives we have lived" (223). She recounts how the note, instead of supporting "the heroine's resolve to repent for wicked living [,] [t]he barely legible phrase [. . . becomes] a promise to Caridad from a former and foresighted self: *You are loved*" (263, italics in the original). She has claimed her identity in a liminal space of her own, independent of family and the males—both in her relationships and in her reading—who influence her. To use López's words, through

the "language transference" of her note in *Moll Flanders*, she has found her freedom in the "linguistic decoding" of her experiences.

Detailing Caridad's negotiation of male cultural tyranny, López's novel ultimately subverts its abusive power. Caridad rejects the "rigidly defined roles" created by cultural tyranny and its canonical texts to embrace Anzaldúa's "fourth choice: entering the world of education and career and becoming self-autonomous" (39). With her education, both informal and formal, both self-directed and other-directed, both from the men she has read and from those she has loved, Caridad has achieved self-faith, emerging whole, resilient in the knowledge that she is fully capable of making good choices, ones rooted in her analytical abilities. She achieves what Anzaldúa describes as the abilities to "feel safe within the inner life of her Self" and "to live life on [her] own terms" (42, 38).

Caridad's journey mirrors the struggle that Anzaldúa describes further in the section "By Your True Faces We Will Know You" when she argues that externally recognized identity is made possible only as the result of internal struggle: "The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109). By stacking the deck so heavily against her heroine through both life and literary experiences, López investigates female identity from her standpoint of a cultural outsider. Beyond merely straddling identities, López uses her position as a Latinx author to create a liberated space that, even with its fluctuating uncertainty, explores how a woman can become a writer despite participating in a culture that would place her at the service of others, not necessarily because of her heritage, but primarily because of being female.

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About the Author

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Daring to be Different: A Review of *The Darling*

Lyn Froehlich

In Lorraine López's 2015 *The Darling*, she offers a compelling narrative about what it's like to navigate the landscape of contemporary romantic relationships with only the compass of classic literature for direction. This novel explores the life and struggles of a young literature-obsessed Latina living in Southern California in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Olga in Anton Chekhov's short story "The Darling," the protagonist Caridad Delgado is constantly in and out of romantic relationships. The "loved and lost" trope runs throughout the novel, complicated by modern relationship issues such as same-sex attraction, cross dressing, and pre-marital cohabitation. Throughout her tumultuous twenties, working-class Latina Caridad is searching for love in all the wrong places, yet in spite of many wrong turns, or maybe because of them, she finds the way to herself.

This coming-of-age story is filled with layered literary twists that connect Caridad's experiences with the literature she is reading along the way. López creatively weaves classic literary characters, such as Lolita and Lady Chatterley, through the steamy pages of this novel as Caridad interprets her own life through the tomes of the literary canon. In *The Darling*, López gives us an engaging and humorous story. Toward that end, she develops the character of Caridad as someone we all know: a young woman trying to rise above the adversity she was born into. López draws us into *The Darling* before we realize we are rooting for this character to pull it together and overcome the obstacles she faces, some of which she creates for herself.

While painful to watch, Caridad's poor choices make her relatable. Drawing the reader into a darkness that seems self-destructive, lonely Caridad longs to be loved, and this desire often overrides her good sense and intelligence. There are drinking binges, boyfriends with serious baggage, and accepted rides with strangers. Even while working at the college library surrounded by her beloved books, she begins dating a co-worker who ends up abusing her. Although her mother and two sisters are a strong force in her life, she ignores their caring advice. One sister, Esperanza, is already juggling a failing marriage, nursing school, and motherhood. Another sister, Felicia, calls her sister out and often

hilariously mocks her poor choices in men. Yet, Caridad does not learn from their mistakes or heed their warnings. Instead, she pursues the romance she associates with the novels she loves, often at the expense of her own best interests.

From the opening page, Caridad fantasizes about the charismatic raconteur Chekhov and goes on to read voraciously from a long list of literary classics. The list includes Theodore Dreiser, Daniel Defoe, Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, and Vladimir Nabokov; their heroines offer inspiration and escape to Caridad as she fills their pages with her annotations. Caridad's regard for herself as a passionate woman blinds her, at least in the beginning, to the greater truths that might be gleaned from these books, even with the limits inherent in their perspectives; hence, she repeatedly subverts her own well-being. For example, stingy with his share of the groceries while living in the apartment *she* pays rent on, Caridad's live-in boyfriend Seth challenges her about eating some of the peanut butter in the cupboard: "'Any idea why that jar of peanut butter I just bought is half gone?' He raised an eyebrow and narrowed his eyes, looking much like a silent-film sheikh who suspects treachery" (50). Caridad's journey is often complicated by such troublesome scenes, and at one climactic moment, we wonder if she will survive at all. Drunk and desperate she brushes close with death after being beaten by an abusive lover, ultimately the father of her child. Although Caridad's name translates to "charity," the reader is filled with disappointment that she could even consider reconnecting with this man who has put her in the hospital, yet she does.

Over the course of the novel, however, Caridad's lived experiences, sometimes traumatic, and often disappointing, combine with her literary explorations to develop and mature her. Woven throughout the novel is the complexity of modern relationships, and her lessons with these relationships balance her faith in classic literature to enable her eventual growth. Every man Caridad has a relationship with demonstrates dishonest and disappointing character traits, and she begins to wonder about her narrative's departure from those she has read. At one point she ponders, "What kind of woman am I? Nothing like Isabel Archer, resigned to a loveless marriage out of stubborn virtue, and not at all like Hardy's Tess, who'd unsuccessfully spurned Alec d'Urberville" (183-4). Caridad undergoes a paradigm shift when one of her male love interests becomes a transvestite. Moving forward without a literary example to follow in this case, they stay together for a time to share responsibility for her young son and because they sincerely care about each other. Reflecting Caridad's point of view, the narrator reveals her overriding desire to see what life will offer next, in contrast

with the classic romantic plots she so loves: "Caridad [. . .] lacked the melancholic determination to throw herself under a train like Anna Karenina. Why did passionate women so often take their lives to relieve their suffering?" (184).

Through the heaviness of these trials, there is a lining of humor in the novel—in the descriptions of a Southern belle mother-in-law, a regifted tambourine, coworker Kitty Fu, and the sarcastic and unrelenting sister Felicia. And, as Caridad sorts through her literary character options for a role model, she does glean some helpful guidance from Moll Flanders and Isabel Archer. The "downs" of *The Darling* quickly transform into "ups" when Caridad is eventually recognized for her own writing and makes modest-but-steady progress in the publication of her poetry.

López writes convincingly about the challenges of being a working-class Latina. This novel explores the many difficulties faced by women like Caridad, her single mother, and her sisters. Raised in a house full of women, Caridad has witnessed her mother's hard work to provide for a household by herself. Despite Caridad's optimism about finding a loving partner and the secure life such a partner might help build, she often finds herself following her mother's example out of necessity. Caridad's eventual breakthrough—from physically and emotionally starved student to intentional and confident mother, intellectual, and college graduate working toward a promising career—is impressive and instructive. As a result of her intellectual pursuits and experience combined, she eventually owns her decisions and resists the urge to blame her problems on poverty, ethnicity, or the father that left the family. Striving to become professional and independent and to build a better life for her son, she takes risks and "grows up," overcoming challenges that many young women contend with in America. This is a book that is hard to put down because the reader wants to see how the protagonist's *un*traditional story will unfold. Through her crazy choices and obstacles along the way, Caridad rises up in phoenix form to make her family and herself proud.

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About the Author

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“If you are anything like me,” You Don’t Belong Where You Belong A Review of Lorraine López’s *Soy La Avon Lady and Other Stories*

Angela Love Kitchin

Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories was Lorraine López’s first short story collection, published in 2002, and the winner of the Miguel Mármol Prize for a first book-length work of fiction in English by a Latinx writer. Masterfully written, López’s text interweaves the lives of its characters as they face struggles that resonate with readers young and old, male and female. Progressing through the stories, readers are drawn into the lives of the characters and are invited to reflect on how they are like each one. At first, readers may feel that the distance between themselves and the characters is vast; however, as the themes of relationship and loss develop, readers discover how much all humans are alike, despite their differences. Laced with humor, angst, sadness, happiness, loss, fear, and love, López’s stories take the reader on an exploration of what it means to be human. López entices the reader into the worlds of her characters through her first narrator, Sophia. By beginning the collection with this story, López ingeniously ensures not only that readers share Sophia’s experience, but also that they willingly go on to share the lives of the rest of the characters they encounter.

Sophia’s story begins, “If you are anything like me” (1), inviting readers to consider whether they are, indeed, anything like Sophia. Through Sophia’s first- and second-person narration, readers become part of her life. Her humor and bare-naked, sometimes literally, descriptions, turn Sophia’s day into the reader’s day. Her friends, whom she compares to a horse and a terrier, become the reader’s friends. Her locker is the reader’s locker; her classes are the reader’s classes. Most importantly, her struggles are the reader’s struggles. To cope, Sophia uses humor and sarcasm to cover the pain of her low self-esteem and encounters with bullies. Although readers may not be struggling specifically with weight, a lazy eye, or teenage bullies, by the end they come to realize that they are, in fact, like Sophia, as all humans must find ways to cope with difficult relationships with themselves and with others. At the end

of her story, she reminds us, "You just have to laugh" (24). Humor may be all Sophia has, but she reassures the reader that it can get us through some pretty tough times.

Although some stories do not address their audience directly, López nonetheless generates a strong, lasting bond between her readers and the characters in the collection as a whole. Readers wonder whether they are anything like Rudy, the main character of "Frostbite," who is plagued with feet ruined by frostbite. Just as untended physical ailments can cause lasting pain, so too can untended emotional relationships. Rudy clearly loves his family but still fails to relate to a grandson struggling with his sexual identity, worries over his daughter who is in the hospital, and ponders why his wife refuses to visit her. Despite the disconnects between members of his family, their importance becomes increasingly clear by this story's conclusion. When Rudy shares his low self-worth with his sister, she reassures him: "You try to do the things that help [. . .] That's what's important" (44). The value of family helping family can be seen throughout all of López's stories, even when the characters themselves feel that they do not belong where they belong, in relationships they did not choose.

While many of López's characters feel they do not belong in their various relationships, López also explores what happens when someone loses the partner with whom they do belong. In "A Tatting Man," Joaquin Benavidez struggles with his identity and sense of belonging after the death of his beloved wife. With her death, a huge hole has been left in Joaquin's life. In order to fill this hole, he starts to explore aspects of his wife that he took for granted or failed to understand. He begins to wear her perfume and robe, smoke her cigarettes, and watch her telenovelas. While Sophia copes with life's difficulties through humor, Joaquin copes with loss through transformation, embodying his wife in order to call back her comforting presence.

As the stories progress, López slowly unveils the complexity of familial connections among the characters. In the title story of the collection, "Soy la Avon Lady," readers meet Molly, an Avon lady who lives alone with her cat, Fabian. Molly has a scar on her forehead that was the result of a car accident in which her grandmother died. Not even her Avon products can cover her physical scar; her emotional scars run even deeper. When Molly returns from a trip, Fabian has an asthma attack that proves deadly. To deal with the loss of her feline companion, Molly goes to a bar, where she meets Fisher Boy, who thinks she is a man in drag and convinces her to leave with him. Upon discovering that Molly is in fact "a chick" (87), Fisher Boy abandons her in an area of town she barely knows. Trying to find her cousin, Elaine, whom she

believes lives nearby, she ends up lost. As she walks, she realizes that she has truly been lost ever since her grandmother died.

As Molly wanders the streets looking for her cousin—unknowingly looking for herself—she flashes back to her relationship with her grandmother. She recalls, "She spoke only Spanish, and I don't know how I understood her, never speaking the language myself. Now I think we must have communicated through the bones" (90). This revelation is the first clue that the family's cultural heritage is being lost and forgotten as its relationships diminish. While many of the older members of the family mix Spanish words and phrases into their conversations—Sophia's Aunt Nilda often says, "Válgame, dios" (6), for example—the younger members of the family speak only English. López expertly develops this point throughout the collection, as she taps into the reader's own recognition of such loss.

Notably, several of López's characters have been affected by the death of a matriarch, and their challenge is to find a way forward. In "After Dad Shot Jesus," López reveals the deep loss that has lingered since the death of a grandmother. When Concha's dad shoots her uncle, readers discover that the family is more upset that the matriarch's no-guns rule has been broken than they are that Jesus was shot. Concha narrates, "Then I understood that Dad had not only broken a rule, but he had broken my abuela's rule" (117). In the family's opinion, it is the breaking of Reina's rule that is the most serious offense that has occurred: "Though Reina died over three decades ago, she still ruled Pueblitos in her absence as firmly as she had when she was alive" (117). While Molly copes with loss by seeking the company of strangers, other family members deal with the loss by trying to preserve life the way Reina established it. Faced with diminishing familial and cultural identity, the characters are forced to learn anew how to relate to those around them.

Another way López develops the theme of relationship is by following key characters through multiple, linked stories. Elaine is first referred to in the collection's fourth story, "Soy la Avon Lady," as Molly tries to find her house. Although the reader does not actually meet Elaine in this story, she does appear later, in "Mother-In-Law's Tongue." Again, López explores the theme of loss in the latter story, as Elaine struggles with the loss of her sons, one of whom died and one who has chosen to live with his father. Elaine appears again in "Walking Circles," the last story in the collection, this time supporting her daughter, Tina, when the father of Tina's unborn baby dies. López brings the reader full circle through life and loss as Elaine is able to have a kind of do-over by helping to raise her granddaughter. From her perspective, now as a middle-aged woman, Elaine experiences this moment with a sense

of optimism: "This thing that Elaine feared could overwhelm and ruin her daughter might be the one thing that could save her" (237). Unable to save her sons and unable to save her daughter from this loss, Elaine hopes this baby will deepen familial relationships and help to mend old wounds. After following Elaine through several stories, López leaves the reader with hope for the next generation.

López's strategy of slowly revealing the connections she has woven throughout the collection makes *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories* a rich tapestry; readers can read and reread the stories and discover something new each time. The eleven stories in this collection demonstrate not only the complexity of human relationships, but also their necessity. This collection also shows how deeply affected people are by the loss of those they love the most. Despite the problems her characters face, López persuades readers that relationships offer a way forward. Through López's tales of both loss and support of family and friends, her characters illustrate that we actually do belong, even when we feel we do not.

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About the Author

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Careful Interventions

Lorraine M. López

In the auditorium, Jane Ellen Klamath gazed with tenderness over the sea of black-tasseled caps. Martin Schumer, dean of humanities at Birnbrau Women's College, stood center stage at the podium to address faculty and students assembled for the first convocation in August, his soft tenor cracking as he touted faculty achievements over the past year. There were not many of these, though Lucinda Aragon, an English professor and Jane's closest friend at Birnbrau, had her manuscript—a first book—accepted for publication. Perspiration glazing his forehead, Dean Schumer drew this announcement out, with much to say about the challenges of creative production while teaching full-time. Despite its pallor, his was a cherub's face fronting a smallish head atop a long-armed, thickset body. Jane glanced at Lucinda, seated beside her. Instead of humbly staring into her lap, as Jane would have done, Lucinda squinted at Martin, her profile sharpened by a dubious, even accusatory expression. She gave a curt nod—suspicions confirmed—when the poor man mispronounced her name and then stammered out her book's tricky title.

Jane, at first glance, loved the dean, every tic and bumble—from the knuckle-popping to the compulsive blinking of his pebbly eyes. Of course, Dean Schumer, in his forties, was a decade too young for her and quite likely gay—he was much too pleasant to be straight—though he was, in fact, married to a torpedo-shaped woman, who was both a neurosurgeon and certified hot-yoga instructor. Sweet Martin more or less raised their triplets on his own. He would set his cellphone out at meetings, in case his teenaged sons or daughter should summon him. It buzzed often with their calls, whereupon he would snatch it up and excuse himself from whatever proceedings were underway, returning only to draw swift conclusion to these. No way would Jane dare to display her phone during a meeting. She didn't even turn it on while she was on campus, so distressing were the calls from her adult sons.

Jane's eyes moistened now with fondness as Dean Schumer spilled his notes on the stage. She winced when he bumped his head on the lectern after stooping to collect these, and she swiveled in her seat to cast sharp looks at those who snickered at this. Applause erupted as Dean Schumer shambled off stage, and the president of the college, a silver-haired man with a permanent smirk on his tanned face, strode

to the podium. In a loud and sarcastic voice, Robin Cormorant thanked Dean Schumer, and then he leaned over the lectern, leering at the audience. Though it was well past the scheduled time for dismissal, Dr. Cormorant rubbed his hands together like a torturer ready to select a few favorite instruments. "Now, if you'll open your program to the schedule of events…"

How Cormorant loved assemblies! He insisted faculty don full regalia for these, and his favorites were outdoor graduations. He relished nothing more than forcing professors into heavy camphor-fumed robes and roasting them under the blazing Georgia sun. During this drawn-out convocation, Jane had sketched a series of trees on her program. As she scanned the list of upcoming assemblies—*another* convocation in spring?—she affixed a noose to a gnarled oak in the margin. Using the rhinestone-studded pen Jane had given her in celebration of the forthcoming book, Lucinda jotted lists on her program. One headed by "soy milk" was likely a grocery list, another a to-do list, and the third—*rusted tambourine, gingham apron, dead mice*—must have been story ideas. Jane caught her friend's eye and winked. Lucinda jerked her chin at the stage, opened her mouth to insert an index finger, and mimed gagging.

Devorah Grisham, a poet who taught composition and literature, tittered at Lucinda's side. While Dev, one of the few black faculty members, could afford to laugh openly, the most Jane would hazard was a brief grin, masked by her raised program. Lucinda much enjoyed mocking others behind their backs, and she'd grown bolder after finding a publisher for her manuscript and scoring a campus interview for a tenure-track position at a research university. The book was a collection of stories that Jane would not read out of affection for her friend. Lucinda based one story on the time they'd spent together with a few other colleagues at a Wyoming artists' residency years ago. Though names were changed, Hailey Linder—a textile artist in fine arts who *had* read the manuscript—told Jane that people were not well disguised in it, intimating that the character based on Jane came across as something of a Machiavellian manipulator. No, it was better for their friendship—Jane smiled again at Lucinda—if she never read the thing.

Lucinda's wiry black hair escaped from its thick braid, forming an inky nimbus under her tasseled cap. As the president droned on, with no sign of stopping, she wore a disbelieving look of revulsion on her face. One glimpse of her wild hair, those flashing eyes and flaming cheeks, that mobile mouth spraying spittle when she was worked up, which was most of the time, and the head of the search committee would slap Lucinda's dossier shut and cry, "Next!" Excitable and strange-looking women like Lucinda were not viable candidates for prestigious univer-

sities that offered tenure, which was why they wound up—among the hopeless multitude gathered here—at Birnbrau Women's College, everlastingly adjuncted by yearly contracts.

After half an hour more, Cormorant, reluctant to release his captives, issued protracted closing remarks, and at last, he dismissed the assembly. Relieved applause burst from the audience. A few brazen students whistled and hooted. Jane clapped with vigor, but Lucinda made a show of drawing her hands together and apart without touching palms to one another. Dev, again, chuckled, as she tapped three fingers against the heel of one hand. The women rose from their seats, chairs scraping and voices buzzing about them.

"Help me round up Tiffany Saunders, will you?" Lucinda searched the audience, a predatory look on her face. "I thought I saw her on the left side, in back."

"Sniffing Tiff or the other one, the LUG?" Jane said, using the acronym for lesbians-until-graduation.

"Sniffing Tiff is Tiffany *Marquart*, the girl who's allergic to everything, and Tiffany Saunders isn't a LUG. She's a true lesbian—or, I should say, a lesbian-for-life," Lucinda said.

"How do you know?" Jane said as they made their way to the aisle. But the women were stalled by a professor of ancient civilizations, a fuzzy-eared hobgoblin who stood patting his robe as if to find keys and blocking the entire row.

"How does anyone know anything? Gossip, of course. Someone must've told me."

"I think she *is* a lesbian-for-life." Dev nodded. "I mean, I've heard that, too."

"Whatever the duration of her lesbianism," Lucinda said, "she's signed up for a tutorial with me this semester, and she still hasn't come by with the paperwork for it."

"What? You need gym shoes? *Again*?" Jane often joked that conducting an independent study earned just enough to purchase a pair of Adidas, excluding tax. But as soon as her words escaped, Jane regretted them. Lucinda's on-and-off boyfriend had just moved out for the third or fourth time, and despite the small advance on her book, she now struggled to pay rent on her own, while supporting her grown daughter and granddaughter. No wonder Lucinda was anxious about the independent study—she needed the pittance it paid.

At last they reached the aisle, and Lucinda snorted. "Oh, I can always use gym shoes, not to mention groceries and gas for my car."

"Ladies." Randy Birch, a lanky biology professor, shuffled toward them. If not for his black robes and headpiece, Randy resembled a workman who'd just emerged from the crawlspace of a house. His face

was gritty, reddish dust powdering his sparse eyebrows and lashes. Bleach-spattered blue jeans and mud-crusted boots showed under his regalia. He paused to address Lucinda. "Buenas noches," he said in an accent that was painful even to Jane's ears.

Lucinda made a performance of looking at her watch and then lifting her gaze, degree by degree, before fixing it on Randy's face. Though just half past three, Randy—and even Jane knew this much—had wished Lucinda a good night. Poor Lucinda, the sole Latina on faculty, often had to endure excruciating attempts by colleagues to demonstrate their embrace of cultural diversity through butchery of the language that she had only acquired in college.

"¿Como estoy?" Randy said.

With palms upturned, Lucinda shrugged. "I have no idea."

Randy grinned. "Come on, now. I know you speak Spanish."

"*That's* the problem," Lucinda told him.

He squawked with laughter, and Dev and Jane joined in as if Lucinda had delivered an effective punchline. Randy, then, shuffled off, calling "hasta la vida" over his shoulder.

"Didn't he just ask you how *he* was?" Dev squinted after Randy, cocking her head.

Lucinda nodded. "I should have said 'idiotic.'"

"The nerve of him." Jane gestured with her program at his denim-clad calves, as he ambled to the exit. "Why, we'd get yanked into Muriel Cheek's office if we ever *dared* to—"

"Oh, I know," Dev said. "Men can get away with anything—jeans, sweatpants, flip-flops—as long as they have that tie."

"For solidarity," Jane said, "they ought to wear uncomfortable clothing to campus. They should suffer alongside us, like comrades."

"That reminds me," Dev said. "Are you coming to the poetry reading next week?"

Jane pretended not to hear this.

"Last semester," Lucinda began, also ignoring Dev's question, "I saw Ken Means coming out of his freshman seminar wearing biking shorts, sandals with socks, and—of course—the tie." She repeated her gag-me motions, and Jane hoped this wouldn't become one of Lucinda's pet gestures. These were contagious for Jane, who had adopted Lucinda's habit of flashing the bird last semester. After the corrupt Dr. Caspar had pressured Jane to change a grade for one of his honors students, a blond doofus who couldn't even *trace* a recognizable image, Jane had followed him out of her office and flipped middle fingers of both hands, popping a double-bird behind his back. She had not expected Caspar to whip about and catch her in the act. Despite the stunned look on his face and the shame furnace-blasting her cheeks, both colleagues—

dispatched by confusion to a territory beyond protocol—behaved as if Jane had waved farewell. "Goodbye, then," she'd said. Dr. Caspar fluttered fingers at her, but his short legs managed extraordinarily long strides, and he'd loped away like a man pursued.

"The reading's only an hour," Dev said. "I'll take you to dinner with the poet before it."

Lucinda's tongue skimmed her upper lip. "Dinner and drinks?"

"Well . . . *dinner*, for sure." Dev's brow creased. "*Maybe* they'll reimburse drinks . . ."

But they all knew the women's college, founded as a Baptist institution, would never cover as much as near-beer. Jane relented in the face of Dev's discomfiture. "I'll go if you do," she told Lucinda, "and *I'll* buy our drinks. What do you say?"

"I *guess*," Lucinda said, as if consenting to donate bone marrow to someone she disliked.

"*There*, there she is." Jane pointed at a girl-shaped blur in the background. "Wasn't that Tiffany Saunders? She took one look at you and dashed for the door."

"What the hell? Is she scared of me?" Lucinda's florid face wadded like a fist. "Why on earth would anyone be afraid of me?"

"I really couldn't say." Jane looked to Dev for a second opinion, but the poet had darted past the crowd for the exit. With much flapping of malodorous robes, the covey of professors that had been plodding along with her and Lucinda now scattered like pheasants flushed from the briars. Within seconds, President Cormorant's sardonic voice boomed out. "¡Hola, profesora Aragon! Una momentito por favor."

Jane had chosen her small cottage off Highway 60 for its closeness to the lake and for the natural light that poured through its many windows. The house itself was just a one-bedroom dwelling constructed as a vacation getaway. It was a fifty-minute drive from the Birnbrau campus and somewhat difficult for visitors to find, but Jane considered that an advantage. As it had no room for a studio, Jane, with the help of friends, had converted the garage into a bonus room, a space where she could paint and sketch, as well as access even more sunlight when she raised the garage door. For Jane, the garage/studio was the heart of her home, though she enjoyed the cottage's small airy rooms, the compact tidiness of these. They were well kept because she spent most of her time in the converted garage. She'd even placed a futon near her easel, so she could nap or sleep through the night when she painted more complicated pieces. Though she was a plein-air artist, after an initial

sketch or quick watercolor, Jane developed details in her landscapes inside her garage.

On the highway toward home, Jane visualized the landscape that she had sketched from the shore over the weekend. That morning, she'd undercoated the foreground—the water—in white, and while the undercoat was still damp, she had blended in azure from the base up to capture the reflection of the sky at the bottom, preserving pure white in the distance. By evening, Jane would fill in the reflected treetops, the sky and clouds in the water. She envisioned the controlled brush strokes that would portray the lake's depth and movement. Nothing challenged her skills more than rendering water—her specialty—with its rippling skin of infinite folds and pleats, its multitude of lights and shadows, its sheen and spectrum of colors, the inverted forms it mirrored. Jane would have to work in a focused way to complete the painting before the semester started in earnest. By late September, she would have to give up her own artwork or suffer the frustration of half-started projects. "Abandon all hope," Jane murmured as she pushed the new semester from her thoughts.

Her cellphone on the passenger's seat trilled, pulsing with phosphorescent green flashes. She glanced at it and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. Earlier it displayed two missed calls. She knew who these would be from. *Tall Drink of Water*, Lucinda called him, mimicking the Wyoming women who referred to him this way. She'd met him a few years ago while on a faculty retreat near Sheridan, and Jane had contacted him when she returned to the artists' residency earlier in the summer. They'd spent much of July together, riding out on horseback from his ranch to paint and picnic on the range. Her last week in Wyoming, Jane had packed her bags and left the residency to stay at his place. Now that she'd returned to Georgia, he called and called.

Tall Drink, only two years older than Jane, eschewed email and texting, saying he liked hearing her voice. Since he wouldn't Skype with her, Jane suspected he was more of a technophobe than a romantic. No matter his preferred mode of communication, Jane knew what he wanted. But fifty-five-year-old women do not abandon teaching positions with benefits, even if untenured. Water-scape artists living near lakes have no business moving to the dry and dusty plains. Mothers of difficult sons within driving distance don't just run off with boyfriends. If he wanted, Tall Drink could come to Georgia to be with her, and though she hadn't dared to ask him, Jane wished with her whole heart that he would.

Her teenaged Toyota now vibrated in a disturbing way, juddering like a superjet about to penetrate the sound barrier. To counter this, she flipped on the radio. Steppenwolf blasted through the speakers.

Jane turned the volume up and shouted along with the gravelly vocalist: *We were born, born to be wild!* Just as the song ended, Jane reached her street. There, in the yard at the corner of the block, stood Dennis Formosa wearing gym shorts and holding pruning shears. When Jane tooted her horn and waved, he set his clippers on the lawn and hurried into his house as if he'd forgotten something. Dennis had been so alarmed by her gift of a lariat to thank him for picking her up from the airport after her first trip to Wyoming that now—years later—he still fled for cover whenever she drew near, as if Jane had signaled with the gift a desire to lasso him. Ridiculous man! Though Jane hoped to remarry, she had no desire to squander her future on someone as timorous as Dennis. The rope had shown him for what he was, and the last time she'd flown to Wyoming, Lucinda had driven her to and from the airport.

Jane pulled into her driveway, and with a glance at the drawn curtains, she sucked in a sharp breath, holding it—one, two, three, four—and then releasing it in a slow and measured stream as if to cool a cup of tea. She turned off her car, chunked open the door, and slid out into the sweltering late afternoon, a lacey scrim of gnats haloing her head. Jane swiped at these with her purse. She inhaled deeply again and smiled in a determined way before pushing open the front door—left unlocked, of course. Jane stepped into living room. "Wallace?" she called. "*Wallace*?"

The cottage stood silent, cool and dark. Jane sniffed musky traces of sweat and body odor, the sour smell of unwashed clothing. Had he run off from the halfway house in Atlanta and hitchhiked here, or had he been discharged and delivered by the state transport system? Weekly infractions had deferred her younger son's release for months, leaving Jane with no idea when to expect him. She set her keys and purse on the kitchen counter, but on second thought, Jane snatched these up again. She would have to keep things in her bedroom now, locked in the floor safe under her bed. The door to her garage/studio—usually ajar—was shut, likely latched from inside. Wallace was no doubt snoring on the futon near the easel that held her painting of the lake, the blanched and azure undercoat awaiting the peculiar grace of upended treetops, the delicate drowning of clouds and sky.

* * *

A week later, at DiColo's, Jane grew muddled by encountering April Madison, a student of two semesters ago, near the dimly lit piano bar. April sallied forth, wearing a black pencil skirt and burgundy blazer with a nametag affixed to the lapel. "Professor Klamath, how great to see you!"

"April?" Jane said. "I thought you—"

"I'm better now." April grinned, baring smallish teeth. Hers was a Pre-Raphaelite face—wide hazel eyes, plush ruby lips, rosy cheeks framed by lustrous red-gold hair—combined with a Rubenesque body, though even Rubens might have been daunted by the amplitude of April's form. "Much, *much* better now." The girl stooped to whisper something in Jane's ear that sounded like, "I'm just one urine test away from getting faith back."

Jane struggled to make sense of this. "Good news?"

"My parents have Faith now. If I test clean next month, I can get back custody."

"Wonderful!" Jane smiled. While she knew April had a daughter, Jane had forgotten the child's name, and she'd no idea that April had forfeited custody. But, as if she starred in a reality-TV show, April Madison expected others to be well versed in her life's events.

April beamed. "I guess you'll be joining Dr. Grisham. She's already here with Narciso."

"Narciso?"

April gave Jane a pitying look. "Narciso *Navarette*, the visiting poet."

Jane pictured the flyers made by Dev's student assistant, Kayla, a girl whose ineptitude distinguished her even at Birnbrau. She'd posted canary-yellow sheets about campus that read *Pottery Reading/N. Navarette*, along with the time and date. Jane had been too distracted by the typo to wonder much about the poet's first name. Still, she'd meant to look him up on the internet beforehand, but she'd been pulled into a disciplinary hearing that afternoon, as a substitute for Dean Muriel Cheek, who'd had a migraine.

"Follow me." April led Jane into the depths of the crowded and noisy restaurant. After a few steps, the girl paused, turning to say, "Professor Grisham's the greatest, isn't she?"

Succulent aromas—roasted garlic, grilled meats, yeasty rolls, tart vinaigrettes—filled Jane's nostrils. She glanced at the steamy plates set before diners. "She's very nice," Jane said, eyeing pan-seared scallops atop a bed of spinach on one candlelit table.

"She really saved me, you know." April indicated a table in the far corner of the restaurant where Devorah sat with a man whose tweed-jacketed back was turned to Jane. "In fact, I consider Dr. Grisham to be my spiritual mother."

"You *do*?" But wasn't there some bad business about the girl's obsession with Sylvia Plath in the aftermath of Dev's seminar on women poets last fall? April had read and reread the poems, memorizing their lines to recite these randomly throughout the day. Jane had once overheard April muttering "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black

shoe...," as the girl coiled frozen yogurt into a cone in the Birnbrau dining hall. And didn't she try to have her name changed at one point—to Sylvia Plath Madison? Though perhaps Jane had imagined this.

April nodded. "I've got to get back up front, but enjoy your meal." She pivoted away. "Oh, and, Professor Klamath, don't order the oysters," April called over her shoulder. "They smell a little off to me." Utensils clattered on china at a nearby table.

Devorah waved Jane over. "This is Narciso Navarette." She stood to make the introduction, but the poet remained seated, nodding his leonine head in acknowledgement. He looked to be in his mid-fifties like Jane, and also like Jane, he dyed his shaggy hair to cover the gray. From where she stood above him, white roots glistered like hoarfrost where his dark hair was parted. Though symmetrical and strong-featured, the poet's face wore an aggrieved expression, a visage Hieronymus Bosch might have captured for an eighth deadly sin: Vexation.

"Pleased to meet you," Jane lied. She slid into the bench seat alongside Dev, likewise facing their guest. "Are you enjoying your visit to Georgia?"

Narciso regarded her with hooded eyes. "I *live* in Georgia." Like April, the poet clearly expected his biographical information to be common knowledge.

"Narciso is part of the *Georgia* Poetry Circuit," Dev said, "a consortium of in-state poets who travel around giving readings and craft talks."

"Then how are you enjoying our campus?"

The poet shrugged. He glanced at his empty glass. "Where's the waiter?"

Before Dev could answer, Lucinda bustled over, wearing skinny jeans in a bilious shade of green, along with an orange sweater—an outfit that made her look like a Dr. Seuss character, wide-bottomed with spindly Grinch legs and long flat feet. Lucinda plopped into the vacant chair beside the poet, and before Dev could perform introductions, Lucinda said, "When did April Madison start hostessing here? I thought she worked at the library."

"She did, but . . . " Almost imperceptibly, Dev tilted her head toward their guest.

"Oh, I know she had that breakdown or whatever, that day she stripped off her clothes."

The poet turned to regard Lucinda with interest, though she took no notice of this.

"They *do* keep the library too warm in winter," Jane said. "It's a waste of energy." One afternoon in December, April had stalked about the stacks, shedding her sweater, jeans, and undershirt, shouting lines to

"Lady Lazarus"—*I eat men like air!*—as she shelved books in her bra and panties until campus security officers arrived to blanket and escort her from the building.

"Wasn't she supposed to go back to work at the library after rehab?" Lucinda said. "That's what the librarians told me."

"Those librarians never keep their word." How many times had they promised to procure Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* for Jane through inter-library loan without ever doing this?

Dev cleared her throat. "Lucinda, I'd like to—"

"Hold on." Lucinda put up a hand. "This was supposed to have come from Cormorant himself. He's the one who promised she'd be reinstated in her classes *and* her work-study job."

"*Robin Cormorant*," Jane said. "How can you trust a *man*—"

The poet aimed his gaze in her direction.

Flustered, Jane cleared her throat. "How can you trust *anyone* with two bird names?"

After this, Dev managed to introduce the poet. Lest Lucinda repeat Jane's error in assuming he was from out of state, Dev explained his connection to the Georgia Poetry Circuit.

At this, Lucinda's face grew incandescent. "Is the circuit just for poets?"

"It's called the Georgia *Poetry* Circuit," Narciso said.

"Why isn't there something like that for fiction writers?"

"Because they have . . . ," the poet said, "*everything else*." Then he instructed Dev to order another scotch for him and rose to lumber toward the men's room.

"What a flaming asshole," Lucinda said.

Dev picked up a menu to scan as if this might speed things along.

"Am I wrong?" Lucinda looked to Jane, who opened her mouth, plunged a finger in, and faked a dry heave: the gag-me gesture already part of her repertoire.

April Madison appeared at her side. "You didn't have the oysters, did you?"

Jane dropped her hand to her lap, shook her head. "We haven't even ordered yet."

"I'll send your server over." Then April leaned in. "By the way, that's eighty-dollar scotch he's drinking. I thought you should know."

"Cut him off," Lucinda cried. "Cut him off at once."

Dev clutched the table's edge, as if she might otherwise faint, and Jane said, "Eighty dollars a bottle or eighty dollars a glass?"

"A glass."

"Why, he's drinking up the entire stipend for my independent study." Lucinda turned to Jane. "I know you said you'd get drinks, but you are *not* paying for that."

Jane dropped her gaze to the table, the votive candle flickering on it. A knot of tallow sizzled before bursting on its wick, and she thought—irrelevantly, irreverently—of Joan of Arc.

"I'll have the server tell him we ran out of the pricey stuff," April said. "You can use my discount for the first drink, and it will only be, like, sixty-five dollars. Can you cover that?"

A doomed look on her face, Dev nodded. Determined to share the cost with Dev, Jane would slip her some cash when Lucinda was not looking. A poet, of all people, should know what it means to be undercompensated and ill-treated. April promised to expedite the meal so they could get to the auditorium on time for the reading. Then she bustled away from the table.

"That girl just thinks the world of you," Jane said, hoping to lift Dev's spirits.

"He's going to be furious." Dev stared out, transfixed by the candle on the tabletop. Its guttering glow sparkled in her obsidian eyes, giving her the look of a prophetess. "I know it. He is going to be pissed off, and he looks like a tantrum-thrower, doesn't he?"

"I'll deal with him," Lucinda said, and Dev glanced up in alarm.

"April says you *saved* her," Jane continued. "In fact, she calls you her spiritual mother."

"I didn't help her at all. I was the one who introduced her to Sylvia Plath in the first place. I encouraged her to submit that paper for the Plath conference, where she fell in with those druggies. Now, her therapist won't let her read Plath anymore, or Emily Dickinson. He wants her to read *Longfellow*." Dev's eyes widened with incredulity. "Can you believe that?"

Lucinda shot Dev a let's-be-frank look. "Ever consider spiritual birth control?"

One Friday, weeks later, Jane's older son Jeremy and his wife, a large brunette with all the charm of an aphasic, deposited their sons—a nine-month-old and a three-year-old—with Jane, in order to participate in some therapeutic couples weekend. Wallace had been staying with her for over a month by then. Her younger son's hair had thinned on top. Like his brother, he'd put on weight and looked a decade older than his thirty years, yet Wallace had a girlfriend now, Alyssa, whom he met at weekly sessions he called "group." Alyssa, a blonde with stringy hair and ruddy weals like angry subdural worms on both wrists, could

be Jane's daughter-in-law's twin insofar as charisma went. Alyssa now spent most of her time at the cottage, sitting on the futon, looking blank and saying nothing. No way would Jane subject her grandsons much to those two.

So she took the boys to the lake each day. In the mornings, Jane lugged the baby in a backpack, along with diaper bag, blankets, and picnic lunches, plodding along the trail like an overburdened mule. She towed her older grandson by the hand as they trudged the lake's perimeter. They stopped often to examine shiny stones and flowering plants, to glimpse turtles and fish skimming the water's undulating surface, and to gape at iridescent dragonflies hovering over the sun-spangled water like jeweled hatpins magically suspended in midair. When they picnicked on the shore, Jane gazed at the boys, straining to remember her sons at their ages. Instead, she kept picturing her grandsons as grown men—large, bald, grim grotesques of their sweet-voiced, clear-eyed child selves.

On Sunday, Jane stayed out at the lake with her grandsons until dusk. Jeremy and his wife, tense and unsmiling, collected their sons at eight without thanking Jane and—*worse!*—without embracing their children. Alyssa returned to wherever she stayed when not at the cottage. Exhausted, begrimed, and sticky with perspiration after a humid day at the lake, Jane looked forward to nothing more than a bath and an early bedtime. She'd brew a cup of chamomile to sip while reading Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, which she wound up ordering for herself online. But it turned out that Wallace had asked Alyssa to leave, so he could speak to Jane alone.

He blocked the doorway to the bathroom before Jane could draw her bath. "I've got some good news for you, Mom," he said, a rare smile lighting his thick face.

"What is it?" In a dizzying moment of hope, Jane imagined he'd found a job.

"Alyssa's pregnant! You're going to be a grandma again."

If Wallace did not understand why Jane flew to her bedroom and locked the door, why she leaned against it, the knob pressing into her back as he jiggled it and tried to push it open, well, that was too bad. Choked by disbelief and anger, she couldn't point out that neither Wallace nor Alyssa were employed and that, as a consequence of this, they had no medical insurance, or to observe that they had nowhere—apart from the cottage—to house a newborn. Jane could not utter a syllable without risking a breakdown like April Madison's in the Birnbrau Library, with rent clothing and mad-woman squalls. *You do not do, you do not do!*

What on earth would *she do* with a bipolar grandbaby?

When Wallace finished ranting the usual rants—that she was selfish, that she cared more for her art than her sons, that she never supported him in anything, that their father left them because of her and who could blame him for it—he muttered something about going for a walk to clear his head. His footfalls receded, the front door slammed shut, and Jane slunk to the floor and crawled to her bed to reach the lock-box underneath it. She reeled her purse from this and dug in that for her cellphone. Jane tapped in the Wyoming area code and now-familiar number. At the rumbling sound of his voice, something gave in her like a faulty sluicegate banging open in a storm, and Jane—a professional educator; a plein-air artist; a mother of adult, if disappointing, sons; a dependable grandmother; and an indisputably mature woman who had not wept in a copious way since her now ex-husband told her he no longer loved her, over two decades ago—blubbered into the phone, convulsing with hot, snotty tears like a child.

Tall Drink asked a few questions that Jane—heaving and hyperventilating—couldn't make out to answer. Then he listened to her sob, but in a few minutes, he hung up.

After her last class the next day, Jane headed from the Fine Arts Center toward the Godwin Humanities Building, where she had a committee meeting scheduled for 3:10. On her way, she stopped at the campus post office to dispose of whatever mail had accumulated in her cubbyhole over the past week. There, she found Devorah, leaning against the bank of post office boxes and staring at a cream-colored envelope and embossed card that she held in both hands. Was she imagining this or were Dev's dark eyes damp, her voice huskier than usual when she greeted Jane?

"Unexpected news?" Jane pointed at the card in Dev's hand.

Dev cleared her throat. "A wedding invitation—you remember my friend Karla?"

Jane recalled the pixie-faced young woman who'd roomed with Dev when she started teaching at Birnbrau, before Dev's mother moved in with her. "How nice." Jane wondered if Dev might be upset about not getting asked to be a bridesmaid. "You must be thrilled for her."

"Yes, thrilled." Dev pulled a tissue from her blazer pocket, honked into it. "I heard your son's staying with you," she said. "How's that going?"

"Great!" Jane keyed open her box and yanked out a stack of ads, flyers, and catalogues to thrust into a nearby recycling bin. Wallace and Alyssa had not spoken to her that morning, ignoring her cheerful overtures along with the pancake breakfast she'd prepared for them,

yet now Jane grinned with such force that she could glimpse her cheeks bunching beneath her eyes. Dev said she was glad to hear this and edged away, heading for the door. Jane relocked her mailbox, continued on toward her meeting.

Onion grass sprouted freely on campus, and sniffing this caused Jane to crave a burger as she strolled toward the Godwin Center. Once there she would convene with Lucinda, Ken Means, Dean Schumer, the odious Dr. Caspar, and Hailey Linder in textiles. Hailey, a petite blonde, had a face with the exquisite simplicity of a Vermeer subject. The birthmark shading her cheek somehow inflected, rather than detracted from her loveliness. Altogether they formed the search committee to replace Kerry Fujimori, a painter who resigned when her parents passed away, leaving an inheritance that allowed Kerry to devote her time to art. The lucky dog, thought Jane as she entered the meeting room and took a seat across from Lucinda and Hailey. Though Jane anticipated hearing all about the certain fiasco that was Lucinda's campus interview last week, she searched her friend's face for traces of despair, as a preview to what would no doubt prove to be a sad, if predictable tale.

But Lucinda was in her usual mood of gleeful outrage as she scanned the agenda before her. "Fucking Frank Means," she said. "How'd that schlemiel get on this committee?"

Jane shrugged, and Hailey said, "To me, it's weird that he hasn't met with us from the start." While Lucinda, in English, served on the committee due to Jane's careful interventions, Frank Means, a ceramicist in fine arts, actually *belonged* on it. But the potter's laziness was exceptional, even world-class, and Jane had no doubt he had schemed his way out of the obligation until this point, taking it on now only to avoid some more demanding commitment.

"With him onboard, we'll accomplish exactly bupkis," Lucinda said. Outside the first-floor conference room, an engine growled in the adjacent parking lot, the recognizable mind-scraping roar of Ken's absurd super-truck. "Here he comes now—big stupid car, big stupid voice, big stupid hair. Can there be any doubt that the man's schlong is really quite schlort?"

Hailey laughed, and Jane issued a subdued smile. The Yiddish was a troubling sign that Lucinda had reconciled with her boyfriend, a Jewish accountant years younger than she. Lucinda had at one time planned to convert to Judaism in order to marry him. But grandmothers typically did not wed professional men in their early forties with no detectable defects. Jane's gaze traveled from the yellowed buttons on Lucinda's pilly beige sweater up her scrawny neck to her livid, sharp-boned face. "Fucking Frank Means," Lucinda said again.

"How did it go?" Jane whispered to her after Hailey excused herself to retrieve the cellphone she'd left in her office. "The campus visit?"

Lucinda's coffee-bean eyes grew round and vacant, her expression that of a cartoon character staggering about after getting conked on the head. "You won't believe this, but I got the job. They called on Friday with an offer."

"That soon?" Jane *didn't* believe it. She squinted at Lucinda for sharper focus. Surely, her friend was mistaken or deluded, the balance of her mind undone by disappointment.

"I was the *only* candidate they brought in. The fiction writer, this old guy, died last spring. They couldn't wait to conduct a full search next semester, so it was like I was competing with myself." Lucinda laughed. "And I almost defeated me, if you can believe that."

Jane nodded. Now, *that* she could believe.

"Of course, I asked for more money when the chair called with the offer."

"You *did*?" Jane was astonished that Lucinda had the presence of mind—the gall, really—for this, when she should have been blindsided by joy, overcome and incoherent with gratitude, eager to kiss the collective feet of all members of that search committee.

"They'll get back to me on the money," Lucinda said, "but they can't very well rescind the offer just because I asked for more. Can they?"

Jane shook her head. In Lucinda's case, they might be tempted, though they'd probably do no such thing. "Congratulations," she said, feeling as if she'd just stepped off a whirligig. Jane thought of the unfinished painting in her studio, certain she would never finish it now. Was this vertiginous and hollow sensation jealousy? Was it grief that her friend would be leaving? Was it disappointment in herself? Perhaps an amalgamation of all three, along with heavy dollops of other foul and dark emotions blended in her like the mixing of too many colors to produce a revolting purplish brown.

Like a swashbuckler, Frank Means burst into the meeting room, his poufy hair glistening in a way that suggested hairspray. He was again wearing bike shorts and a polo shirt onto which he'd clipped a bowtie. Martin Schumer and Dr. Caspar then arrived together. When Hailey returned, wagging her cellphone in triumph, Martin opened the meeting. Glancing at the faces ringing the conference table, Jane teetered at the precipice of precognition—a dizzying flash of déjà vu. Excepting Kerry Fujimori's replacement by Frank Means, this group comprised the same committee she met with last academic year. After narrowing the search to three candidates and just before scheduling campus visits, funding for the position had fallen through.

Dean Schumer, blinking spasmodically, now handed out folders to committee members. “Here are dossiers for our top three candidates from last year,” he said, his cherub’s face clenching each time his eyes shut. “We can save time by revisiting these applications.”

“But wouldn’t they have found jobs by now?” Jane’s eyes fluttered, the lids rising and falling again and again. She couldn’t control her compulsion to blink back at Martin. Horrified that he might think she was mocking him, Jane fumbled for her sunglasses and slipped these on.

Martin popped knuckles of all ten fingers in rapid succession. “I’ve checked, and they’re all available,” he said. “The market is tough for candidates in this field.”

Lucinda opened her file sleeve and scoffed. “I’m not surprised Brain Fart is still available.” She’d formed a grudge against a candidate who during a conference call interview had drawn a blank in response to one of their questions, saying, “I must be having a brain fart.” They had all traded dubious looks over the speaker-phone, and afterward, Lucinda, who cursed with abandon, claimed to be deeply offended by this utterance.

“I thought she was one of our better candidates,” Dr. Caspar said, damning Brain Fart with the other committee members. “She displayed keen interest in honors.”

Jane flushed, her eyes batting behind dark lenses as she recalled Caspar’s attempt to get her to change that honor student’s grade. The girl couldn’t draw a convincing circle, but then she never *tried*. Like many of Caspar’s honors students, she considered art courses “fluff” and said so when she met with Jane before enlisting Caspar to intervene. “It’s all so subjective,” the girl had said. She’d pointed to a Chagall print hanging in Jane’s office. “Why is *that* art? Why isn’t what I draw art? Just because you say that I don’t spend enough time on it?” Such students failed to comprehend that creating art ought to take all of their time, all of their lives. That was what Jane loved about her work, that she would never finish solving its problems or confronting the challenges it posed.

“She even talked about developing a studio-art course for honors,” Caspar said with a pointed look in Jane’s direction. “I think that’s an idea whose time has come.”

Lucinda eyed Caspar in the way a mountain lion might regard a brain-damaged squirrel that had stumbled into its lair. Oh, she’d dispatch him in due time, but first, she would enjoy whatever amusement the addled creature might provide.

“Let’s invite Brain Fart for a campus visit.” Frank issued his automatic grin, a rectangular flash of bleached teeth.

"Doesn't she have a name?" asked Hailey, a puzzled look on her Flemish maiden's face as she paged through the file. "Oh, here it is, Regina, Regina Barresi. Wasn't she the one with those dark and depressing slides?"

Jane nodded. The candidate's portfolio consisted of greenish-gray and muddy brown images. "Swamp-scapes, she called them. She claims to be 'anti-color.'" Her gaze arced toward Lucinda as if tracing the trajectory of a softball lobbed in her friend's direction.

"*Anti-color*?" Lucinda drew back, wearing the expression of one who has trod barefoot on dog droppings. "¡Carajo! We can't have *that* here. Who's next?"

"I think we ought to go back to the drawing board then," Caspar said. "Maybe place another ad and look for someone who balances things gender-wise in the art department."

Jane shared a glance with Hailey, and they both turned toward Frank Means. The ceramicist was the only male in fine arts. His antipathy toward other males was on par with his dedication to doing as little as possible, and Jane wondered which would win out. Frank did not disappoint. "Are you suggesting we renew the search, that we read a ton of applications and then conduct a slew of phone interviews? Are you out of your mind, man?"

Martin popped his knuckles again. "Besides I don't think it's appropriate or legal to—"

"It's actually a good idea," Lucinda said, astounding Jane. "We ought to diversify by gender across the board, alternating male and female program directors. We could start with honors next semester."

Caspar, blanching, at last apprehended his peril.

"In fact," she continued, "I will call the motion at our next full faculty meeting."

Dean Schumer's cellphone buzzed. He grabbed it and held up an index finger before bustling out of the conference room.

Jane turned on her phone to check the time. It was only three-twenty. How was it that time passed more slowly during these meetings? Why, if Jane learned she had a terminal disease, she'd attend meeting after meeting to stretch out her last days infinitely. She snapped her phone shut and excused herself for a drink of water. Lucinda was chatting with Hailey and Frank, while Dr. Caspar fiddled with his phone. No one glanced up when Jane left the room.

In the empty hallway, Martin Schumer's soft tenor gained resonance with reverberation. "Sure, I can pick her up, no problem. How's the new yoga class, sweetie?"

At the endearment, envy again twisted in Jane. Dean Schumer's muscular back to her, she paused before the water fountain, a few yards away, vicariously enjoying the warm tone he used with his wife.

"It's always rough in the beginning," Martin said, "but they'll get better." He sighed before speaking again. "Same old, same old here. Caspar's burying himself deep, Frank's a fool, and Jane…You know Jane." He laughed. "She's good, so good that when Lucinda speaks, you never even see Jane's lips moving."

Stricken, Jane crept away. She slipped back into the conference room. Again no one looked up until her phone chimed with a call. At sight of the displayed number—the Wyoming area code—her heart tripped, a coronary hiccup, and she flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Hey, I'm here," he said. Static crackled like cellophane crumpling in her ear, and an announcer's voice blared unintelligibly in the background.

"Where?"

"Here, in Georgia. I'm at Hartsfield in Atlanta."

"What are you doing here?" Jane gripped the phone with both hands now.

"Tall Drink?" Lucinda asked, and Jane nodded. If Lucinda knew of her phone call to him last night, those incoherent tears, she would think this more manipulation, a ploy to get him to come to her and to fortify her against the machinations of those who would play her for everything she had, those she could no longer outmaneuver on her own. *We do what we can,* as the now-retired Kerry Fujimori used to say when confronted by impossible tasks coupled with insane deadlines, *and somehow we find ways to do what we can't.* For the first time, Jane longed to read Lucinda's book and draw inspiration from her fictional self.

Lucinda, Hailey, Frank Means, and Dr. Caspar stared at Jane, openly eavesdropping.

"You sounded like you could use some help last night," Tall Drink told her, "so I took the first flight out of Sheridan. Should I rent a car or can you pick me up?"

"I'm in a meeting right now," Jane said. "But I'll come for you as soon as I can. Just wait for me. It's nearly rush hour, so it might be an hour or more."

"I'll grab a bite then and read the paper. Call me when you get close and I'll meet you curbside near baggage claim." Not one for goodbyes, he hung up again.

Martin returned and adjourned the meeting to collect his daughter from soccer practice. As the group consulted calendars to schedule the next meeting, a curious glow skittered across the ceiling, a rain-

bow splinter of refracted light. Jane tracked this to its source: Lucinda's left hand. Was it a diamond ring glinting in the sunlight slanting through the blinds? Jane lowered her sunglasses to see the rhinestone pen Lucinda, a southpaw, clutched as she scribbled on her agenda. Of course, Jane would have had misgivings about an engagement undertaken in the aftermath of Lucinda's job offer. But what did she know? If someone as odd and off-putting as Lucinda garnered a position at a prestigious university, why shouldn't she become a bride, too? Strange women would do strange things. There was a peculiar sense to this.

Jane clapped her datebook shut, jammed it into her bag. "Oh, I don't *care* when we meet again," she said with force, astonishing herself and startling the group. "I have to go. I *can't*..." She rose from her seat, wondering if she should explain she meant more by this than just excusing herself from the room, but Jane didn't know how to end the sentence she'd started—*what couldn't she do?*—so she gave a tight smile and turned for the door, catching one last glimpse of the prism strand hovering now on the ceiling like an iridescent hatpin, a dragonfly suspended for scant seconds over the lake before darting from sight.

About the Author

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2018 SAMLA Graduate Student Creative Writing Award: Honorable Mention

Coop

Kristy Maier

And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,
bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun,
and hold you in the palm of His hand.

On Sunday afternoon, after church, Mary laid down in the chicken coop, waiting for Jesse. She crawled through the chicken hole and, after slipping out of her dress, positioned herself in such a way that if she looked upward, she could see all her hens around her, and if she turned her head to the side, she could also gaze upon the setting sun. It was tick ticking, dip dipping into the horizon. One notch down, two. A little lower, a smidge orangier, like the Mango Tango crayon.

Wilma, Bernice, and Ms. Seus were already asleep, their beaks tucked into their pillowy wings. Barbie was saying something nasty to Luanne, probably along the lines of how much better Mr. Samson liked her, which made Luanne cluck reproachfully and ruffle her feathers with a miff.

One nest was left empty though. Even after three months, she couldn't believe Delilah was gone. Of all Mary's hens, she was the most beautiful. Her black feathers shined Mountain Meadow in the sun. When Wilma or Luanne dashed to the compost pile behind the house, Delilah would stay and peck grubs wherever Mary was coloring. One time Barbie chased Delilah across the front yard and she flew up so high Mary could have sworn Delilah had soared into the sun. Never before had she seen a chicken fly above fifteen feet, let alone travel beyond the clouds. But, Mary sniffled, Delilah wouldn't ever touch the sun again. Jesse wrung her neck and threw all her radiant feathers to the wind. Mary found her head in the driveway, reduced to a mushy lump by the dog. Her brother dangled the lump above her head and called her a sissy for crying.

Mama, Gabe, and Jesse loaded their plates with brown cooked chicken. Jesse said grace and the three of them ate ravenously. Mary

narrowed her eyes at the rib cage, a knife lodged in the breast. With his thick sausage fingers, Jesse ripped a slab of meat from sinew and skin. Snap went the cartilage. Crack went the bone. Fat dripped from Jesse's nails. Licking his lips, and grinning, he asked why Mary wasn't eating her dinner.

Mary turned her head to watch the sun, still hanging in the sky, clawing to its last rays of life. She was surprised it wasn't nighttime yet. The sun was stubborn like in that battle Mama was talking about from the Bible. The battle when Israel defeated the Amorites. When the sun stood still and the moon stayed for a whole day. Perhaps the sun would also remain glued in the sky tomorrow and the next day. Then Mary would never go back to school because it would always be Sunday. Mama would always be working in the factory. Gabe always shooting his BB Gun at the doves. If the sun stayed still, Jesse would never stop rambling about himself, as he always did on Sunday afternoons. On and on he'd go, talking talking talking, till he ran out of so much spit he'd die of dehydration. He'd keep droning even in his faintedness, and by the time Jesse was rushed to the hospital, he would have shriveled to nothing more than a dried prune. Mary realized that it was not Israel who defeated the Amorites, but the sun alone.

All the hens had fallen asleep, nestled in their plumage. The boards under Mary's back were warped. Chicken poop squished in the hair on the back of her head. A black feather, a remnant from Delilah, drifted Fern Green in the sun's last rays and settled on her belly button. Mary heard the front door open. Footsteps. Rustling clothes. A faint murmur. Mama. Even when she wasn't singing at service, her voice carried like hymn. "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not fear the terror of the night." It was Psalms 91, Mama's favorite verse. The one she repeated in times of greatest need. For all other times she would pray the Our Father or the Hail Mary—a leftover from her Catholic roots that First Baptist was trying to expel.

Mama had been praying the Our Father, the day she held Mary close, after Delilah's chicks had died. As they explored the world with their mother, Delilah taught them how to clean themselves, how to peck for grubs, and how to tell when a puddle is too deep. And when it was finally time for bed, she would gather them into the cloud of her feathers and peck at Little Simper when he kept cheeping.

But when the dog ate Baby Bay the rest had to be protected. Mama moved them into a pen with corn and water dispensers. Mama told Mary it was her job to take care of them. If she loved her chickens very much, she would check on them every day. However, Mary didn't remember. Couldn't remember. She was so busy coloring, playing with

Gabe, and doing chores for Mama that she forgot they hadn't been fed in a week. Mama had forgotten too. She found Delilah panting in the summer sun, wings spread over her chicks to protect them from the burning rays. After Mary released Delilah, she saw how the chicks were not moving. Not cheeping. Just little balls of fluff disintegrating in the wind.

Mary plucked Delilah's feather from her belly button with her thumb and forefinger and pressed the bit of down to her lips. Softer than clouds. Much lighter than flight. In reality, flight was a heavy thing. Like a huge palm pushing her into the dirt. Mary and Gabe climbed up the tornado tower so she could fly. Twenty-three steps to the top. They gazed upon the Texan plains. Mary squinted at three white farm houses in the distance. The trees rose up like prickly carpet, and although it was nearly noon, thick summer mist still clung like a wheeze on the fields. Even at such an enormous height, the air was as sweaty as down on earth.

Gabe stood behind Mary, pointing to a cow field on the farthest edges of their vision. She could fly to that field way way off. She could fly like Super Man. He knew she could do it. Mary was the only one who could. Mary remembered Mama talking about the devil testing Jesus in the desert. How could she fly? She had tried jumping off buckets, fence posts, the chicken coop roof. But no matter what, she was only granted a single breath of flight before God's palm forced her back down. Flying was impossible for any human. But Mary wasn't anybody, was she?

Down below, a small blob exited the house, looking left then right. Next, the blob looked upward: Mary and Gabe were to climb down that instant. Mama picked up her skirts and rushed to just below the lookout tower. Devil children, torturing her. If they didn't get down now, there'd be a belting. Mama always wielded that phrase when something was the best of fun. Gabe leaned in closer to Mary, letting his lips roll over a hiss.

Fly like Delilah.

Mary's eyes widened. As if opened for the first time. Her pupils shrank to needle-tips. She spread her arms. She was Delilah, but as huge as an eagle. Mary prepared to lift the entirety of her weight in one heavy gust. Out of the nest. Into the canyon. Mary puffed out her chest and turned her nose toward heaven. The clouds sprinkled teeny pinpricks. Scalding.

Mary aimed for the cows. But flight was a very heavy thing. She couldn't direct herself. Mary was only flying down down down, house melding into trees, into chicken coop, into plains. After she hit the ground, bouncing on the dirt, everything was a warped swirl of Green, Brown, Gray. Then Red.

In time she had come to label the colors of flight. Electric Lime. Beaver Brown. Manatee. But the color Red that leaked through the bandage around her palm was just Red. Not Radical Red. Just plain eight-crayon-box Red. The closest that could compare was the Red of a chicken's comb. Wilma's comb stood up like four rough and squishy fingers, trying to hold the outside world and fumbling. It was a hand without a palm. Useless.

She heard Mama on the porch, waiting and praying for Mary. The sticky air had her puffing and flapping her fingers back and forth as a fan. Footsteps padded on the grass through the front yard. There was a loud snicker from Gabe, listening for the show.

Jesse opened the coop's door as the sun was finally drowning in the horizon, gurgling on distant trees and grass. He towered over Mary, lying naked on the floor. She couldn't make out his face. It was blocked by his belly. Jesse hadn't changed out of his Sunday best. The suspenders stretched too tight around his gut. His patent leather shoes crushed week-old chicken poo. The leather so shiny it reflected the sun as it traveled over the toe, and then was gone.

Jesse unbuckled his suspenders. He stroked Mary's face, her arms, her torso, down her legs and back up them. Her body was thin. Her skin was bare. There was no down to pad her tender back and thighs. Not a single feather sprouted from her arms to grant her flight. Jesse's enormous weight was more oppressive than God's palm, than gravity, than mildew, than oozing beans, than a dog run over wheezing, than a toad mating in the slimy night. Slimier than his sweat congealed like snot, like rotten honey.

On Sunday evenings, Mary was not an eagle, not a chicken, not Delilah. She was just a girl, a human girl, plucked Pink and raw.

About the Author

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From Alice to Algernon: The Evolution of Child Consciousness in the Novel. By Holly Blackford. The University of Tennessee Press, 2018. 296 pp. $50.00 (hardcover).

Darwinian ideas of evolution heavily influenced the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. In line with this, children became an object of study as "a window into the roots of human nature" (1). Holly Blackford tackles these ideas in her *From Alice to Algernon: The Evolution of Child Consciousness in the Novel*, divided into an introduction, seven chapters, coda, notes and index.

Blackford provides an overview of anthropological theory, beginning with a Boasian shift in viewing people and cultures. The forty year period of primary focus, from 1871 to 1911, produced new approaches to studying children, roughly corresponding to the Child Study of early developmental psychology essentially from Darwin to Freud. Child consciousness became a site of inquiry in both literature and culture, and developmental psychology post-Darwin held a literary mirror in which a child was reflected.

The goal of the monograph is to show how Child Study was both "constructive and destructive in intellectually situating 'development' and stimulating in the novel a modern method of consciousness" (242). Five of the seven chapters create a pairing of texts to fit a somewhat artificially, randomly defined example of a child's psyche. It is unclear what informs the chapters' central ideas and how the texts to support them were selected. While the introduction traces the development of themes with case studies drawing on psychology, sociology, anthropology, and experimental techniques in novels, the author promises to investigate the influence the novel had on Child Study and vice versa, from the late nineteenth century through the present.

Opening the case studies, Chapter One pairs up Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and James's *What Maisie Knew*. These novels are concerned with the child's powers of reasoning since children learn from nature. Of much curiosity to the two novelists was their characters' freedom to make choices as well as their innocence and uncorrupted nature. These qualities, according to Blackford, were juxtaposed with children's intelligence, exemplified by experiential learning, internalization of others, and adaptation (37). Paradoxically, these authors reached a realization that the child's mind was an alien landscape even if the child was instrumental to understanding the origin of human consciousness. Chapter Two compares Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* to Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*; here child consciousness is displayed as a particular aesthetic reaching beyond

ideas of socialization. While Alice spins her "own fictions from props and cultural materials" (70), Anne embodies thresholds. Both novels mimic a child's perspective on the inconsistent manner in which adults treat children. A discussion of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian* Gray and Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* is the subject of Chapter Three. A vow of eternal youth connects the two protagonists, but the novels themselves "queered the child and infantilized the queer" (92). Informed by arrested development, both characters channel the consequences of valuing youth over and above social responsibility (97)—Peter Pan is simply Dorian without a portrait to upbraid him. Making a surprising comeback in the monograph, Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, this time revived as queer consciousness, is matched with Gordon's *The Well of Loneliness* in Chapter Four. This chapter deals with the sensitivity and corporeal nature of both protagonist girls, who are seen as not quite feminine in a sexological approach. In Chapter Five, Cather's *My Ântonia* offers two of its characters, Ântonia and Jim, as a focal point in the discussion of evolution and extinction in the Freudian trope of childhood as an authentic self that is affected by civilization. Steeped in racism, the two characters hover in liminal consciousness, fluctuating among countries, genders, and eras. Wright's *Native Son* stands alone as the central text in Chapter Six and its theme of pervasive critical consciousness. The problems of growing cities are analyzed through the lens of adolescent growing pains, punctuated by the intersection of gun violence and immigration. In her analysis, Blackford juxtaposes sociopathology and disability with the interpretation of environmental disturbances perceived by the adolescent mind stuck in developmental arrest. Chapter Seven pairs Keye's *Flowers for Algernon* and Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. According to Blackford, within these novels, modern environment coexists peacefully with the machinelike mind, but while the physical disability was given adequate study in the novels, intellectual disability lacked in proper treatment. The characters in these two novels view themselves as a successful evolutionary mutation, but their "final choices of freedoms are not really freedoms" (239). Following the torturous. All references to the Chicago School's sociological studies create an impression of a quick, limited review of literature. Both Montgomery's Anne and Carroll's Alice had been the topic of Blackford's previous publications, but *From Alice to Algernon* adds little new in terms of interpretation of these two texts.

The monograph is a misfire of the academic pressure to publish while teaching in higher education. Even the intended audience for this text remains a mystery. *From Alice to Algernon: The Evolution of Child Consciousness in the Novel* might be entertaining as a selective

reading not unlike a library reference volume rather than a cohesive, polished monograph analyzing a single, unified idea. The only overarching concept present in the text is a child—beyond this, the book is arbitrary at best. Although shaky individual chapters address select themes, as a thematically unified text, the monograph falls quite short.

Never judge a book by its cover (or title): the enigma of the alliterative title remains unsolved as it neither pairs the two titular characters in a single chapter nor provides a satisfying alphabetical beginning-to-end correlation from A to Z. As with any selective work arranged around a vague focal idea, much is omitted here, too. Absent are novels that would have much more suitably supported the author's claims, e.g., Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (for Chapter Two about modernity), Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (for Chapter Four about homosexuality) or Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* (for Chapter Seven about disability). Selecting works written exclusively by either British or American authors bespeaks Blackford's certain Anglocentric limitation and disregard for the evolution of child consciousness as seen through the eyes of a multitude of novelists from other parts of the world or other languages; with the ever-increasing advocacy for diversity, it would have been only appropriate to include other equally exciting and valid perspectives. It is also quite puzzling why the author does not delve into the smorgasbord of recent novels about extraordinarily ordinary children deluded into taking on world-altering or world-saving tasks.

Overall, *From Alice to Algernon: The Evolution of Child Consciousness in the Novel* fails to deliver beyond an intriguing cover.

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