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## Brave New Girls: Female Archetypes, Border Crashing, and Utopia in Kate Braverman's *Palm Latitudes*<sup>1</sup>

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As the twentieth century has spun to a close, literature and society have been replete with the same kind of *fin de siècle* archetypes produced at the turn of the previous century. In *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter reminds us that themes of imperial decline, urban homelessness, sexual revolution, and sexual epidemic repeat from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. “Lat-ter-day Nordaus,” Showalter writes,

like Alan Bloom, William Bennett, or John Silber preach against a new American Dusk, in which the breakdown of the family; the decline of religion; the women’s liberation and gay rights movements; the drug epidemic; and the re-definition of the humanities merge to signal a waning culture. For some years already we have become accustomed to the electric signs of apocalypse ... that seem characteristic of late-twentieth-century life — dire predictions of disasters that never exactly happen, or perhaps have invisibly happened already — the greenhouse effect, the stock market crash, the nuclear threat, AIDS, terrorism, crime, urban decay, crack. (1-2)

Any perusal of supermarket tabloids, current television fare, the religious and political right, the tenor of education in America, or Times Square on a Friday night will back up Showalter’s claims. As at the close of the nineteenth century, late twentieth-century literature, media, rhetoric, and culture are consistently marked by images and archetypes of cataclysm, dire prediction, dis-ease, and finitude.

Showalter’s *Sexual Anarchy* is a study of gender and culture as affected by the *fin de siècle* notions that accompanied literature and social mores at the end of the nineteenth century. She defines “sexual anarchy” as the breakdown of “all the laws that governed sexual identity and behavior.... As Karl Miller notes, ‘Men became women. Women became men. Gender and country were put in doubt’” (3). Even though I find substantial and crucial differences between the representation of the nineteenth *fin de siècle* and the twentieth *fin de siècle*, Showalter’s notion of sexual

anarchy is a determining factor at both. *Palm Latitudes*, the second novel of contemporary novelist Kate Braverman, confronts the issues of sexual anarchy that Showalter addresses: notions of gender and country. Published in 1988, and set in contemporary Los Angeles, *Palm Latitudes* is the story of three women who live in the Echo Park *barrio* (neighborhood). The women, Francisca Ramos, Marta Ortega, and Gloria Hernández, each exemplify Chicanas in contemporary Los Angeles society. As a story about contemporary Chicanas, *Palm Latitudes* is well situated to discuss a variety of borders: sexual borders, gender borders, ethnic borders, legal borders, the borders that surround centuries, national borders, and linguistic borders. Showalter notes that “in periods of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense” (4). Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s offers a perfect microcosm of Showalter’s assertion: the ghettoization of the myriad of ethnicities within the city, gang economies and gang warfare, “English only” sentiments expressed by propositions 187 and 205, Rodney King, O.J. Simpson, and Heidi Fleiss all exemplify the cultural insecurity and the fears of regression and degeneration of which Showalter speaks. She continues: “If the different races can be kept in their places, if the various classes can be held in their proper districts of the city, and if men and women can be fixed in their separate spheres, many hope, apocalypse can be prevented and we can preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of that relentless specter of millennial change” (4). Braverman’s project, however, is not to provide a comforting sense of identity or permanence; rather, she means to cross and merge borders in such a way that an entirely new and perhaps initially uncomfortable and uncomfortable sense of identity is forged. To borrow from Guillermo Gómez Peña, in *Palm Latitudes* Braverman tries to create a “new world border,” one which, as the pun suggests, is without the rigid borders insisted upon by those frightened by the specter of millennial change.

Because Braverman uses *fin de siècle* archetypes to propose the crossing rather than the strict maintenance of borders, *Palm Latitudes* is a work of utopian fiction. Utopian fiction can be seen as a kind of crisis-writing, and the close of the twentieth century is popularly perceived and represented as a crisis-time, even as apocalyptic.<sup>2</sup> *Palm Latitudes* presents a utopia, but a very postmodern one. Such a utopia cannot be a geographical one, for that would undermine the value of border-crashing. It can, however, lead to a social and cultural utopia, one determined by issues of textuality, linguistics, and idealism. This kind of utopia would be a place where the reimagining of borders helps not to decenter but rather to uncenter

in the attempt to replace the dangerous cultural, social, and linguistic rigidity that exists today with a provocative and liberating fluidity that might render inappropriate even the distinctions between center and border.

In *Sexual Anarchy*, Showalter discusses several *fin de siècle* types: the Odd Woman, the New Woman, the Dissected Woman, the Veiled Woman and the Homosexual Man. It would be possible to discuss every character in the novel in terms of Showalter's types — Marta Ortega, *la bruja*, in terms of the Odd Woman; her daughters, Angelina and Orquídea, in terms of the New Woman; Francisca Ramos, *la puta de la luna* (a nickname, translating roughly as “the moon's whore”), in terms of the Dissected Woman; Gloria Hernández, *la esposa* (the wife), in terms of the Veiled Woman; and Marta Ortega's next-door neighbors and best friends, Joseph and Bill, in terms of the Homosexual Man.

We first formally meet Marta Ortega, *la bruja*, the Odd Woman, in the penultimate section of the novel, after Gloria Hernández has killed Barbara Branden, the ancient Elm tree has uprooted itself and crashed to earth, and the ferocious Santa Ana winds have whipped a common San Gabriel Mountains brush-fire into a raging wild-fire that threatens the entire city of Los Angeles. We meet Marta Ortega formally, then, at the apocalyptic moment; indeed, Marta Ortega herself, watching the scurrying-rabbit residents of Flores Street, makes the analogy of “heathens to a mountain altar when a volcano rumbled” (194), and notices that their mouths are “laden with Apocalypse and penances” (202). It is a moment, like a *fin de siècle*, of cataclysm and rupture.

Marta Ortega's eponym, *bruja*, is a Spanish word, akin to the word *curandera*, the definition of which encompasses such notions as “faith healer,” “witch doctor,” “midwife,” and “voodoo priestess.” None of these is entirely correct, but they denote a woman who is believed to have powers of healing, of prophecy, of witchcraft. *Brujas* know the future; *brujas* are often implored to cast spells or perform “magic” similar to voodoo, but they also perform as midwives and folk-medicine practitioners. They are an integral part of the Chicano/a community, as well as archetypal figures within Chicano/a fiction.<sup>3</sup> While the figure of the *bruja* may be a somewhat unsettling one, it is not her status as a *bruja* that marks Marta Ortega as an odd woman. The figure of the *bruja* is a common one in Chicano/a literature and culture — mysterious, but not odd. It is rather the way that Marta Ortega conducts her marriages and her sex life that marks her as an odd woman.

Showalter claims that the sexual anarchy of the nineteenth century *fin de siècle* “began with the odd woman. The odd woman — the woman who could not marry — undermined the comfortable binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles” (19). The odd woman remains with us at the current *fin de siècle*. We have

only to remember the flap Dan Quayle made about the television character Murphy Brown: her unmarried status was, in Quayle's eyes, very threatening. Add to her unmarried status her high professional rank and her motherhood, and she was imbued with the power to wreck the American family, not to mention the separate spheres of which this (perhaps mythical) family was allegedly constructed. Marta Ortega is similarly threatening. Having suffered two unhappy and stifling marriages, Marta Ortega is a self-sufficient (and we suspect rather wealthy) producer of rare orchids. She is the single mother of two daughters who have earned college degrees and been around the world. She is self-educated, having read alphabetically through the world's literature and philosophy:

She began with the classics in Spanish and English, then magazines, novels translated from Russian, French and German and slim volumes of poetry. Her parents were stunned by her ability to collect these books and by the perversity of her selection.... "Baudelaire. Melville. Dickens," [her father] raged. "A thousand books and not one of them is about God" ... On the afternoon her father burst into her bedroom, she had just completed Cervantes. According to her plan she would read Dostoevsky next. (205-206)

It is her reading that first makes Marta Ortega an odd woman in the eyes of her family and the community. She will not learn to cook, to court, or to worship at the local Catholic Church as the "normal" young women of her community do, but pursues an intellectual independence that marks her as odd. Because her family cannot change her, she is "disposed of" (206), married to a man she cannot stand but who, her family hopes, will normalize her as they could not.

Her husband, Salvador Velásquez, is ignorant, illiterate, adulterous, and abusive. Nevertheless, it is Marta Ortega who the community perceives as the troubling element in the marriage. When *she* confesses *his* transgressions to the local priest, and admits that she wants to escape her marriage, the priest tells her, "to leave a husband would be an unforgivable sin." She rejoins that "my life with this so called man is a sin. What difference can one more make?" Padre Pérez has no answer for her, only mumbling, "Muy tranquila, Maria, con calma" (216-17).<sup>4</sup> She becomes for him just one more of the innumerable and ridiculous "Marias" who have the audacity to be unhappy in their marriages. Showalter tells the story of Beatrice Webb, a Victorian woman who married, unhappily, Cambridge professor Alfred Marshall. Webb wrote that her husband believed that

woman was a subordinate being, and that, if she ceased to be subordinate, there would be no object for a man to marry. That marriage was a sacrifice of masculine freedom, and would only be tolerated by male creatures so long as it meant the devotion, body and soul, of the female to the male.... Contrast was the essence of the matrimonial relation: masculine egotism with feminine self-devo-

tion. "If you compete with us we shan't marry you," he summed up with a laugh. (qtd. in Showalter 25)

Certainly Salvador Velásquez is threatened by Marta Ortega, his literate and sexually demanding wife. When she is pregnant with her first child he begins to cheat on her: "Now, when she should be caressed, whispered to, held as if she were holy, this fraudulent and deluded man was calling her fat and lazy as he began his elaborate ritual of preparing to go out for the night, three nights, a week or a year" (219). Her open and obvious sex and sexuality so frighten Salvador Velásquez that he is compelled to turn away from his wife. It is his adultery that, in the end, allows Marta Ortega the legality of divorce, even though when she does divorce Velásquez, her father beats her, and refuses to acknowledge her, even going so far as to refuse her food and sundries — bare subsistence — from his *mercado del pueblo* (village market).

Her second marriage is no better. Octavio Herrera is a delivery man for a florist to which Marta Ortega supplies orchids, whom she seduces, and marries, on impulse. She quickly realizes her mistake:

She designed an identity for him. Octavio Herrera had no interior architecture of his own. He was a void, willing to assume whatever Marta Ortega gave him. He was grateful. He had been nameless. Now he was named. Marta Ortega imbued him with purpose and direction, complexity and substance, but she recognized that her husband possessed none of these qualities. (232)

Marta Ortega has more education and more economic power and independence than her new husband ever has had, or ever will have. She has power over him in a variety of ways, and it is all too often that power which is perceived as the threat the odd woman proposes. Ultimately, Octavio Herrera cannot understand or live with this odd and sexually powerful woman:

She wanted to make love in the afternoons when he returned for lunch from the flower store and the day stalled, and the palms were draped with languor, air amber. She was hungry for sudden pleasures. She desired him at noon, when the sky was borderless cerulean, an invented ocean, a lagoon in an undamaged August. Yes she said, now, naked, our bodies an offering the gods can paint. (234)

Marta Ortega's intellectual prowess is as evident in the passage as is her sexuality. She uses language that betrays her own embedded knowledge of her odd-woman status: the words "borderless," "invented," and "undamaged" suggest that she is attempting to make a place where she is not labeled and disdained. Her invitations are, of course, refused: "Conversas como una puta" (236), Octavio Herrera replies to his wife in disgust. But Marta Ortega is not a whore, and she is not really like a whore, either. She is a wife and a mother. She is a successful business-

woman and a woman who is sexually liberated and demonstrative. She negotiates between these several types or ideals. Unfortunately for Marta Ortega, Chicano/a culture and literature is not one of negotiation but one of fixed and rigid binary opposition: a woman is either a virgin or a whore; similarly, she is either a wife and mother or a whore. (There is a conflation between virgin and wife and mother in that the Virgin Mary was all three: virgin, wife, and mother.) In Chicano/a culture and literature, to try to be, as Marta Ortega does, several types or ideals — to try to break down the borders of stereotype and archetype — marks Marta Ortega as odd.

The iconographic binary of the virgin or the whore (or the wife and mother or the whore) is persistent in Chicano/a literature.<sup>5</sup> The cultural icons of *la Malinche*, the mythical lover of Cortéz, blamed for starting the *mestizo* (mixed, especially here as the mixture of Indian and Spanish blood) “race” (also known as *la Chingada*, “the Fucked One”), and *la Virgen* constantly reappear in both Chicano/a communities and literature, wherein woman are figured as either “mothers or whores” (Braverman 234). In *Palm Latitudes*, Braverman includes the type of the whore in the character of Francisca Ramos, *la puta de la luna*. Francisca Ramos has followed a path to prostitution that can be seen as typical: a poor girl from a village in central Mexico is moved to Mexico City by her family so that she can work as a domestic, thus insuring her a place to live as well as an income. After working for three or four families, she becomes the mistress of one of her *patrons* (employers), Ramón, who teaches her to speak flawless English and to recognize “textures,” both exterior — “silk, leather and linen, suede and sable, but never mink” — and interior — “books, music, ideas” (17). Together they travel the world, visiting museums and fantastic ports of call. Ramón drapes Francisca Ramos in gold and jewels and what she perceives as love. In a scene of incredible brutality, Ramón beats her, forces her to orally copulate him, informs her that her secret name is “slut,” and then dismisses her with the jewelry, some cash, and the admonition that her luggage is Louis Vuitton — “they are the only Louis Vuitton bags you will ever own. Try to hang on to them” (35). Francisca Ramos tries to work as a domestic again, but she cannot. She falls in with a gambler but remains his paid lady luck only as long as the luck lasts. She eventually marries a poor manual laborer in Miami. He is aware of her past and proposes to tame her; she will not be tamed, and simply walks away from the marriage, and into the life of *la puta de la luna*.

The icon of the prostitute was also prevalent at the close of the nineteenth century. In the 1880s and 1890s incidents of syphilis rose sharply and doctors predicted “the unavoidable ‘syphilisation’ of the western world” (Showalter 188). The epidemic was rhetoricized in apocalyptic terms, as a plague sent by God as punishment; T. S. Eliot’s father Henry Ware Eliot “maintained that syphilis was

God's punishment and ... hoped a cure would never be found. Otherwise, he said, it might be necessary to emasculate our children to keep them clean" (Showalter 189). The implication is clear: syphilis is the fault of women, specifically women who are prostitutes. At the close of the twentieth century, similar rhetoric abounds about AIDS — that it is God's punishment of those who do not live by his rules — but as AIDS spreads beyond the homosexual population, we hear similar rhetoric applied to drug users and prostitutes, two groups at extreme risk of contracting the disease.

The conflation of prostitution and disease at the close of the nineteenth century led to the attitude, in Showalter's words, that "the prostitute could be turned into a silent body to be observed, measured, and studied, her resistance to conversion could be treated as a scientific anomaly or a problem to be solved by medicine" (128). She gives the example of the *fin de siècle* fad of the "anatomical Venus," wax figures of beautiful women, often placed in erotic repose, whose "lids" opened up to reveal the mysterious inner organs of sexuality and reproduction. We have no twentieth-century equivalent to the anatomical Venus, but the prostitute remains a figure of cultural dissection. In *Palm Latitudes*, Francisca Ramos, *la puta de la luna*, recognizes the conversionary, or curative, or even colonial language in which her customers imagine her. The wealthy men who can afford her offer her protection, arrangements, guarantees, hotels with cocktail lounges decorated with chandeliers and fountains. They expect that this vision of glamour will arouse her, as if she were a peasant newly arrived in a capital. Or perhaps less, an Indian eager to sell her hunting lands and the grounds where the bones of the fathers rest in sacred burial for strings of glass beads, trinkets, appliances, cheap furs. They know nothing of the chemistry of a city dying, surrendering to weeds and wildflowers, to eruptions of orchids and jungle vines. They do not recognize that one exists not by blessing of the gods but by their indifference. (12-13)

These men do not realize (although they should, for they pay her large sums of money for her sexual services) that *la puta de la luna* does not need the economic protection they offer her. But more importantly, they do not realize that she does not perform sexual services for the money; she does it because it affords her some control over her life. They perceive prostitution as an illness — notice the language at the end of the above passage: "chemistry," "eruptions." Or they perceive her as a geography that they could map and own. But Francisca Ramos, despite their perceptions, maintains prostitution as a method of self-invention.

The neighborhood *cholos* (hoods, or gang members) who cannot afford *la puta de la luna* have a different perception of her. To them she is a wild animal. They

imagine that “she hisses and scratches like a jaguar. They say she carries a cuchillo, her fingernails are claws. Perhaps she is ... a thing still part jungle with connections to ancient rituals best left undisturbed” (15). They are actually closer to the truth than the rich businessmen, but imaging a woman as a wild animal is merely another way of making of a woman a case, as Showalter points out: “transformed from ‘she’ to ‘it,’ so that her individual experience becomes impersonal and statistical, meaningful primarily as experimental material for the scientist” (128). The *cholos* and gangsters whisper, behind her back and when she is well out of hearing range, that *la puta de la luna* is

more trouble than she is worth. They dream of raping her beside the lake, or ripping her silk clothing from her flesh and taking her with force in the back seats of cars. They would grind her skin into concrete. They wonder whether she would break as simply as ordinary women, if she would bruise and bleed beneath their weight and the puncture of their fists. They do not speak of this. They simply spit Puta, puta into the gutter and feel uneasy in their laughter. (15)

Bestializing *la puta de la luna* allows violence: in order to “break” wild animals, violence is permitted. Furthermore, the passage suggests that if these young men are allowed to do this violence to her she will become an “ordinary woman.” During times of *fin de siècle*, it is seen as imperative that people, but women especially, keep within established and well marked spheres. *La puta de la luna* — an economically and emotionally independent woman, a flamboyant and dangerous woman — will not be kept within these spheres. She will suffer herself neither as a domestic nor a wife, and in doing so she exemplifies women whose “sexual and professional expectations and whose freedom to move in the public space of the city seem[s] to transgress male boundaries and endanger male sanctuaries” (Showalter 139). Francisca Ramos sits easily and healthfully in what others consider her illness, patiently and surely in what they consider her wildness: she knows better than they do the worth of her territory, her terrain.

Braverman is not making the specious argument that prostitution is in any way empowering. She includes the character of *la puta de la luna* because *la puta* is a Chicano/a archetype, a demeaning icon. But Braverman does not restrict her representation of that icon to a static, fixed image; rather she presents *la puta de la luna* in a constant state of self-invention, a constant state of process. *La puta de la luna* realizes that she strikes people as

a corrupted madonna, not alabaster but wood, darker and more resonant. Her flesh is a layering of teaks, ebonies, spice, a dense jungle mist, steaming, symmetrical and insistent. She wills herself to be radiant with heat and she is, creating a sphere of red like a beacon, a promise of an intangible and intimate con-

nection with earth and clay. She is that which has been sculpted and baked by an older and more forgiving sun. (29)

Notice the language in the passage. It recalls paganism and Christianity, sirens and saints, civilization and wilderness, art and nature. *La puta de la luna* is not restricted to any single sphere or region. As such, then, the icon of the prostitute is not nihilistic. The nineteenth-century and Chicano/a stereotyping of the prostitute has been placed under erasure by the border-crashing of *la puta de la luna*. Along with the character of *la puta de la luna*, we as readers learn as she does what the *curandera* of her village told her upon her departure, that “Maria Magdalena was no less a saint than La Virgen de Guadalupe” (19). Braverman’s use of female *fin de siècle* and of Chicano/a images and archetypes has a liberating rather than constricting agenda.

It is liberating because Braverman’s construction of gender in *Palm Latitudes* emphasizes process; both gender and individual female characters are indeterminate, disjunctive, incomplete and perhaps incompletable. The female characters Braverman writes are types: either *fin de siècle* types such as the odd woman, or the dissected woman, or Chicano/a types such as *la Malinche* or *la Chingada*, *la bruja*, and *la puta*. However, the emphasis is not on the imagery, on fixed and totalized archetypes. Rather it is on the process of their manifestation, as archetypes and as text. Near the end of the novel Marta Ortega realizes that

all afternoons are confluences of happenstance, unexpected intersections, vortices of ambivalence, a mysterious geometry that is not an abnormality but organic. The impulse insists upon manifestation, demands gestures, choreography, proofs and pyramids. It rises in vines and mists across cliffs of young palms and banyan. It assumes the form of tin shacks which rains erase or stucco bungalows ringing absurd configurations which pronounce themselves cities. It is the substance expressing itself. And it is urgent, incautious, mad. (361)

The passage emphasizes process rather than product: “It is the substance expressing itself.” The verbs — “insists,” “demands,” “rises,” “assumes” — are active and present. And the images in the passage are those of process: choreography that implies dancing rather than the dance; vines which grow but are not grown; proofs, wherein one shows one’s work rather than just an answer. The passage demonstrates the process of construction, of imagination, of self-invention.

In *Palm Latitudes* we have characters who are constructed from archetype and icon, yet they try to escape fixity by constantly pointing to their own self-invention. Furthermore, as characters in a constant state of self-invention, they point to — indeed, they narrate — a novel which constantly refers to its own self-invention. *Palm Latitudes* is not a lisible or didactic product; it does not tell its read-

ers how to escape or overturn the demeaning female stereotyping rampant in Chicano/a culture and literature, or at the close of centuries. Rather it is a scriptible, deconstructive project in which the characters themselves re-present their constant self-invention, revision, imagination — their construction. Francisca Ramos reinvents herself as *la puta de la luna* in order to make for herself a world tolerable to her sensibilities. Marta Ortega uses her status as a *bruja* to construct a space in which she can demonstrate her intellect and sexuality. These are not choices according to or even against a subjective world. These are acts of narration that construct a subjective world. These women take icons and make stories out of them in order to make a world in which they can live. Such constructions can be compared to Ihab Hassan's "Petit Histories" of postmodernism which oppose the "Grand Historie" of modernism, and which furthermore function as to what Hassan calls "immanences," or

the capacity of mind to generate itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, immediately, its own environment. [Immanence derives from] the emergence of human beings as language animals, *homo pictor* or *homo significans*, gnostic creatures constituting themselves, and determinedly their universe, by symbols of their own making. (93)

Hassan's argument is textual; it is idealistic. It requires a leap of faith more than it demonstrates empirical proof. But that does not keep it from being applied to material, political, "real" life. It seems to me that immanence is exactly *Palm Latitude's* project. The archetypal — both *fin de siècle* and Chicano/a — characters that participate in its narration, by that very participation, destroy the spheres that constitute the archetype. They freely cross the borders that try to enclose them and to maintain the static, iconic, and oppressive images of women as mothers or whores.

Because it engages in such border crashing, *Palm Latitudes* is a utopian project. We are all familiar with the less than succinct definition of utopia as a "no place" (the Greek *ou* which expresses a general negative added to the Greek *topia*, for place or region), but we forget that Thomas Moore also used the word "eutopia." *Eu* in Greek connotes "a broad spectrum of positive attributes from good through ideal, prosperous, and perfect" (Manuel and Manuel 1). In their consummate study of utopias and utopianism, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel point out that "the conception of heaven on earth that underlies Western utopian thought presupposes an idea of perfection in another sphere and at the same time a measure of confidence in human capacity to fashion on earth what is recognized as a transient mortal state into a simulacrum

of the transcendental” (17). Furthermore, Manuel and Manuel maintain, utopian discourse argues that utopia “already exists somewhere on a far away island and has been seen by human eyes [and that] the model reported on should be imitated” (5). Both of the Manuels’ definitions of utopia highlight the idea that utopia was traditionally believed to be a real place, geographical and topographical. Their definitions also point to the often forgotten idea of utopia as best place, and it is this definition of utopia worth probing here. In “Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics,” Darko Suvin suggests that utopia is a place where “socio-political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (132). Both American literature and American apocalyptic and utopian sensibilities arise out of an alternative historical hypothesis, one that, as Manuel and Manuel note, has long identified America with utopia. That historical hypothesis began with Columbus’ assertion that he had found the new earthly paradise, and continues today in an ideology that promotes America as the last best place.

Like all American utopian fiction, *Palm Latitudes* proposes America as the last best place, but it is a utopia of a distinctly postmodern ilk. The idea of a realm at once imaginary and actually geographical and topographical is very modern. Under those terms utopia is a finished, totalized product. It is a place, a thing, an ideology even, that lies within mappable borders, borders which must be recognized and respected. The utopia that *Palm Latitudes* suggests is a place, a thing, an ideology altogether different. Braverman’s utopia is very much a postmodern, scriptible utopia. It does not imagine a fixed, physical place or realm with impermeable borders. Rather it recognizes no borders and promotes an indeterminacy and incompleteness that demand ever-shifting borders. It does this not by postulating a far-off yet geographical other place, but by postulating a textual crossing of established borders, particularly gender, linguistic, and literary ones. Marta Ortega tells her daughter, “‘Remember this, Angelina. Defend no borders but those of sensibility.’ Angelina nodded in agreement.... And it occurred to Marta Ortega that to be one woman, truly, wholly, was to be all women. To tend one garden was to birth worlds” (230). Inherent in Marta Ortega’s realization is a definition of a postmodern, scriptible utopia: one that is achieved not by drawing borders around a place and calling it “best,” but by crashing borders, placing borders under erasure, so that all places can be best.

It is important that we recognize the utopia that *Palm Latitudes* proposes as a textual, scriptible crossing, or even erasing, of established borders. One of the es-

tablished borders the novel crosses is that cultural and linguistic one we call Chicano/a. *Palm Latitudes* must be considered as a work of Chicana fiction. We have defined Chicano/a literature as those works written by persons of Mexican ancestry who live in the United States. To my knowledge, Kate Braverman is not of Mexican ancestry; none of my research into the novelist or her work revealed any suggestion that she is. We should therefore reform a definition of Chicano/a literature — not simply so that we might “get away with” calling *Palm Latitudes* a Chicana novel, but because a definition based solely on bloodlines is far too narrow for any literary category. (Literature is, arguably, always less existential than formal. It is less about the experience of its author than about the formal considerations to which that experience is subjected.) In his important collection of essays, *Retro/Space*, Juan Bruce-Novoa maintains that

Chicanos in literature choose to be other than U.S. American or Mexican. They reject the chaos of deculturation, but in the act of defining themselves they discover a non-Mexican identity as well. The literature is the production of a space of difference, an intellectual synthesis between dialectical forces.... To attempt to eliminate completely one or the other is to cease to be Chicano.... Chicanismo is the product/producer of ongoing synthesis, continually drawing from what seems to outsiders to be opposing cultural elements, an “inter” space for a new ethnic identity to exist. (31)

Chicano/a, then, is something entirely new — neither American nor Mexican, but something new. To be Chicano/a is to be a “synthesis between dialectical forces” — between, for example, a United States that speaks English and writes novels and a Mexico that speaks Spanish and recites *canciones* (lyric poetry, often sung) — but always a synthesis. It takes both to be Chicano/a, and if Braverman is a white, English-speaking, U.S. citizen, then she, too, is part of what it takes to be Chicano/a.

Bruce-Novoa suggests an “inter’ space” wherein exists Chicano/a. This “inter’ space” is very reminiscent of Derrida’s abyss, especially as he defines it in “The Law of Genre”: “there is only content without edge — without boundary or frame — and there is only edge without content” (237). Chicano/a literature always encompasses the idea of border and content, in part because Chicano/as have always lived in the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, but also because this national border implies and instigates a host of other borders, and by these borders, contents. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes the U.S.-Mexican border as “*una herida abierta*” (“an open wound”) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a

third country — a border culture” (3). Her description is overtly political, and a little gory, but what is important is that her description implies process, incompleteness, lack of closure, and the notion that out of two distinct lifebloods we get a third, seemingly more potent, lifeblood.

In describing what she calls “a consciousness of the borderlands,” Anzaldúa cites Mexican philosopher Jose Vasconcelos who

envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines* [a mixed race, a mixture of related races].... this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides a hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making — a new mestiza consciousness.... (77)

This is precisely what Braverman is up to with *Palm Latitudes*. Producing Chicano/a literature, which already allows for mutability, for exploration of spaces as much as contents, *Palm Latitudes* imagines and narrates the text of a consciousness of the Borderlands. *Palm Latitudes* is the textual evidence of the hybridization of Vasconcelos’ philosophy. Marta Ortega calls her children and grandchildren “hybrids” and she knows that “the context expands and ... that the core is fluid”; she knows that “solidity is an illusion,” and she often considers the “implications of the mixture of white and Indian blood which comprises her” (324). She, like Francisca Ramos, like Gloria Hernández, knows that she lives in “las latitudes de las palmas, tu tierra natal ... the kingdom which you were born to. The realm of the multifarious accidents which constitute you. The palm latitudes, where no passport is required” (349). Braverman may not be of Mexican ancestry, but she is a resident of Los Angeles, and so of the palm latitudes, the borderlands. And *Palm Latitudes* is an act of literature that inhabits the edge and narrates the contents.

It is important that it is Braverman who performs this act of literature. I know I take the risk of offending many Chicanas and Chicanos by claiming that a white woman can write, indeed has written, a Chicana novel. But Braverman’s point, like Anzaldúa’s, like Derrida’s, is that we cannot stand on either side of (gender, linguistic, cultural, national) borders and shout one another down. In “The Frontiers of Utopia” Louis Marin reminds us that in medieval and modern perception utopia was very much like an island between the two banks of a river, “neither this edge *nor* the other,” a “neutral place,” a “common-place” (410). Marin goes on to remind us that utopia is never actually that island, but a representation of it, and that “as a representation, Utopia is always a synthesis. It decodes its image, it deciphers its icon. It stands as a perfect idea above any limit; it asserts an originary

or eschatological projection beyond any frontier, and gains a universal validity by making all details explicit" (413). By the very act of decoding and deciphering, we locate, or make, that common-place.

We have seen how Braverman decodes the imagery or iconography of Chicano/a literature, and deciphers a consciousness of the borderlands; she also decodes the language of both Chicano/a literature and culture. In *Palm Latitudes*, when Gloria Hernández has difficulty in learning English she thinks, "the border did not lie at Juárez or Mexicali or Tijuana. The border sat in my mouth" (118). Indeed. Like nearly all Chicano/a literature *Palm Latitudes* employs the tactic of code switching (using both Spanish and English). Code switching, however, does not imply bilingualism, as Bruce-Novoa points out: "we do not go from one to the other nor do we keep them separate. They are in dynamic tension creating a new, international 'language'" (qtd. in Spitta 76).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is why Braverman does not italicize the Spanish she uses liberally throughout *Palm Latitudes*. She is making — and using — a new language, and would not want italicization to distinguish, indeed, to discriminate between Spanish and English. I am reminded of Barthes' work in *The Pleasure of the Text* where he imagines "someone ... who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions ... who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible" (3). Gloria Hernández interprets each page of English-language text as "an entirely new continent" (118) and she imagines traveling to a "kingdom" that is "green without interruption, verdant beyond the concept of intervention" where she could "learn the art of ... singing from behind a carved and painted mask" (119). Her imagination is Barthes'. Mary Bittner Wiseman points out that Barthes questions the "incompatibility of languages said to be incompatible by tracing the paths from one to the other, showing the one, utopically, to satisfy impossible desires harbored in the other" (296). Bruce-Novoa's dynamic tension might very well answer Barthes' questions of incompatibility in that it suggests that culture and language are what happen in the space that the hyphen between Mexican and American creates. And again, we are back to utopia as a crashing of borders.

*Palm Latitudes* destroys borders, in an act of literature that begins to satisfy impossible desires. Barthes' utopia of language is one where we must reread and rewrite both the real and the conceptual system by which we represent the real. Such a rereading and rewriting does not lead to a geographical utopia, but to a scriptible one. A scriptible utopia is one where space is imagined as product and production simultaneously, not as void, empty, or least of all, static. A scriptible utopia is one wherein we can cross, if not erase, the borders of gender and language, of ethnicity and nationality, and in doing so foreground the notion of no

edge without content, no content without edge. The idea of no edge without content, no content without edge, *is* the idea of utopia — a no-place that is the best place. It may be presently scriptible — textual, linguistic, and idealistic only, but such textual, linguistic, and ideal labor and practice is at least the map to utopia.

The turn of any century finds human beings afraid of the doomed world they imagine theirs to be. Showalter argues that the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* exhibited people trying desperately to keep others “in their place” in order to forestall impending doom. Certainly there has been no shortage of people trying to do the same as the twentieth century approached its finitude. But there are also those who suggest — and make art to the effect — that the turn of a century is but a border to cross, and in crossing it we move toward utopia, not doom. In *The New World Border*, Guillermo Gómez Peña puts it thus:

What does it mean to be alive and to make art in an apocalyptic era framed/reframed by changing borders, ferocious racial violence, irrational fears of otherness and hybridity, spiritual emptiness, AIDS, and other massively destructive diseases, ecological devastation, and, of course, lots of virtual space? How to function as a fluid border-crosser, intellectual “coyote,” and intercultural diplomat in and around this abrupt landscape? And ultimately, how to understand the perils and advantages of living in a country that speaks at least ninety different languages and — unwillingly — hosts peoples from practically every nation, race, and religious creed on earth? (i)

Gómez Peña calls his work a “disnarrative ode to hybrid America — a new country in a new continent, yet to be named” (i). His description of his work is the very description of utopia. If we do perceive the cultural, social, and linguistic problems of the present as apocalyptic, as Gómez Peña does, perhaps a radical break is not far off. But perhaps also that radical break will not end in the building of a 1,000 mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border, but in the eradication of that border as a linguistic, cultural, and social barrier. Perhaps a utopia of tolerance and pluralism is close at hand.

In hoping, if not calling, for such a postmodern, scriptible, decoded, deconstructed, hybrid, incomplete and incompletable utopia, I am asking that we relocate our notions of culture and nationality, language and literature, tradition and community. In fact, such a relocation is already under way, as Homi Bhabha points out: “The very notion of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities — *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* — are in a profound process of redefinition” (936). This redefinition of the grounds of cultural comparativism leads to, Bhabha asserts, a “radical revision of the concept of human community itself.

What its geopolitical space may be, as a local or a transitional reality, is being both interrogated and reinitiated” (937). Bhabha never calls that geopolitical space utopia, but he does invoke the idea of the borderlands, and bordertimes, as likely places, and times, for it to happen. These revised and reinitiated human communities, Bhabha writes, “deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate,’ and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity” (937). Notice Bhabha’s use of the words “translate” and “reinscribe” : inherent in them is the notion that the textual, the scriptible, the ideal can indeed become “geopolitical space.” Bhabha calls it “being in the ‘beyond’”:

to inhabit an intervening space ... to be a part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our historic, human commonalty; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space “beyond,” becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. (938)

Bhabha’s “beyond,” his “intervening space,” his “revisionary time” — these are all full and promising and plausible definitions of utopia, a utopia that can indeed become geopolitical space, and it can become one here and now. Novels like *Palm Latitudes* are “acts of writing the world” (Bhabha 941), or, as Marta Ortega says, “to tend one garden is to birth worlds” (Braverman 230), and, as Bhabha argues, “as literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when *something is beyond control but not beyond accommodation*” (941). That, too, is a full and promising and plausible definition of utopia: beyond control but not beyond accommodation. The *fin de siècle* narrative quest of *Palm Latitudes* does make a world, a fluid, hybrid, reinvisioned, reinscribed, accommodating world, and we can live in it, if we choose to.✿

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A shorter conference-style version of this essay appeared in *Anticipating the End: The Experiences of the Nineties: Proceedings from The Virginia Humanities Conference*. Ed. Susan Blair Green. Staunton, VA: Mary Baldwin College and The Virginia Humanities Conference, 1999. 73-83.

<sup>2</sup> At this point in the essay the words “apocalypse” and “apocalyptic” have appeared three times. “Apocalypse” or “apocalyptic” and “*fin de siècle*” are not synonymous. Apocalypse has distinct Christian (and ancient Hebrew) denotations; *fin de siècle* merely translates as the “end of a century.” Nevertheless, the terms do share a certain amount of connotative similarity in that they both imply notions of finitude and rupture, cataclysm and a panicky terror, end times and judgment. Cataclysm, judgment, the end

of the world and the coming of the Kingdom of God are promises made in the Book of Revelation. Christian eschatology may not specifically attend each *fin de siècle*, but pervasive feelings of doom, disaster and adjudication, similar to what is promised in the Bible, do seem to attend each *fin de siècle*. When I use or quote the words “apocalypse” or “apocalyptic” in this essay I do not mean to invoke the Christian sense or denotation of the words, but only the cultural or popular connotations described in this note.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this piece I will use the term Chicano/a. When referring to the community or literature as a whole, I will use the inclusive form, “Chicano/a” ; when making a specifically gendered point, I will use “Chicano” or “Chicana.” When referring to literature, the term Chicano/a is defined as literature written in the United States by persons of Mexican descent or ancestry. Thus, literature written by persons living in the United States of, say, Puerto Rican, or Colombian, or Spanish descent or ancestry is not Chicano/a literature. Latin American and puertorriqueña literature do have the Spanish language in common with Chicano/a literature, but little else. As Juan Bruce-Novoa points out in *Retro/Space: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature*, it is significant that Chicano/a literature “derives itself from inland North-central Mexico, while Puerto Rican is Caribbean and coastal. [Furthermore,] Chicanos see themselves as Indian and Spanish; Puerto Ricans emphasize their Black and Spanish heritage” (28-29). Another point that Bruce-Novoa makes is that Chicano/as “in literature choose to be other than U.S. American or Mexican” (31). The Chicano/a denotation is not simply another word for “Mexican-American.” Bruce-Novoa argues that Chicano/a is rather the space that the hyphen creates, a space wherein something, and someone, entirely new can emerge and be. *Retro/Space* in its entirety provides a thorough examination of Chicano/a literature, society, culture, and politics. See also Luis Dávila and/or Heminio Ríos in *Modern Chicano Writers*, ed. Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Braverman neither italicizes nor translates the Spanish she uses in her novel. For me, this tactic reinforces the idea of code switching addressed near the end of my article, but for those readers not familiar with Spanish, I will translate all of Braverman’s Spanish here.

*Muy tranquila, Maria, con calma.* (Take it easy, Maria; be calm.)

*Conversas como una puta.* (You talk like a whore.)

*cuchillo* (knife)

*las latitudes de las palmas, tu tierra natal* (the palm latitudes, your native land)

<sup>5</sup> See Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Female Subject in Chicano Theater: Sexuality, ‘Race,’ and Class,” for a thorough discussion of literary icons in Chicano/a literature.

<sup>6</sup> For solid linguistic affirmation of Bruce-Novoa’s assertion, see Carol W. Pfaff and Laura Chávez, “Spanish/English Code-Switching: Literary Reflections of Natural Discourse.”

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